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Spectrum Contributors
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Savages

Ruth Koob

Mulberries. So plump with ripeness they burst at a touch. So deeply hued they were nearly black. They hung, expectant, from venerable boughs like tempting apples in Eden, urging sampling. Millions upon millions littered the shade, staining the grass purple.

We flocked like blackbirds to those mulberry trees and perched on those limbs as if by second nature, flapping our arms and cawing like ravens.

We gorged ourselves with primordial abandon. Handful after handful after handful. Stained lips sent forth wild interjections, queries, and half-answers: a din of messages garbled by mulberries.

Into that cacophony hobbled the neighborhood matriarch, her face wrinkled and pinched like a dried up apple. She wagged a gnarled, accusatory finger and said, "Idleness is the devil's workshop!" To which someone replied, "Oh, we ain't idle—we're eatin' berries. Have some?"

Her eyes narrowed with the wrath of Jehovah. Slowly she turned and hobbled away, admonitions clicking like castanets against her loose upper plate.

Undaunted, we resumed our chatter, comprehensible now as sarcasm, sacrilege, caricature.

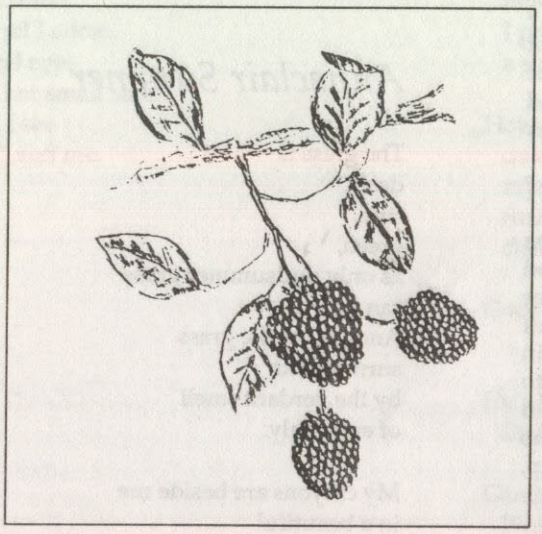
"Look at me! I'm Reverend Pittack!" Suddenly a freckle-faced boy sat up as straight as a fence post, quickly parted his hair down the middle with his fingers, spat it slick, inched his glasses down his nose, and rattled off a score of unrelated Bible verses in a well-practiced, imitative nasal twang punctuated with pseudo-asthmatic wheezes.

"Why d'ya 'spose he makes us learn all those dumb verses, anyway?" he asked, suddenly casting off the ecumenical persona and slumping back into his familiar pre-pubescent self. "What a waste of time! Nobody ever says Bible verses 'cept on Sundays, and then it's only the Reverend and the Sunday School teachers that do. Ya never hear 'em saying stuff like that on the street, or in the grocery store, or at the movies. Not even at Sunday matinees. So what's the point?"

"Maybe it's so's we'll be better Christians or somethin'," someone ventured as if by rote.

The speculation hung there, dangling like our tanned legs from the mulberry branches.

"What I want to know," continued the caricaturist, "is how come everbody listens to the Reverend, seeing's how he's the devil an' all."



Communal incredulity. Even the lumbering bear-like boy at the base of the trees ceased his primal berry-stomping to look up at the freckle-faced slanderer.

"What d'ya mean, 'the devil'?"

"Well, ain't ya ever noticed his pointed ears and his beady eyes and how he's always talkin' 'bout sin? Besides," he continued, feigning nonchalance, chinning himself effortlessly from one of the higher branches, "he has a forked tail."

A chorus of disbelief.

"God's truth," he insisted. "I seen it myself. One time when the Reverend was givin' Communion, the tip of his tail poked out from under his robe, just for a second, but I seen it, plain as day."

Exchanged glances. Twitching muscles. Nervous laughter.

"I don't believe it," announced the neighborhood skeptic. "You're just talkin' wickedness." He shifted his weight on a faintly protesting bough and commenced swinging his plump legs in rhythm to the song he always sang in the face of blasphemy. Sharp b-flats and flat g-sharps cannibalized his all too familiar rendition of "Jesus Loves Me."

An anonymous shove sent him sprawling onto the mulberry layers below.

"Uhhh!"

But he rose with a good-natured grin, his white t-shirt one huge orgiastic smear of purple, blue, and black. He wiped his mulberry-stained palms on his thighs, let out a hefty whoop, then the smearing began in earnest, all summer-bare skin a fair target.

Purple streaks emblazoned foreheads. Primitive symbols tattooed cheekbones. Enigmatic circles banded wrists and ankles.

Whoosh! Hordes of tribesmen leaped from the trees, armed with purple ammunition. Mulberries squished between toes and stained soles as deep and black as sin.

Then through the humid air, mothers' voices called, as if from some unfathomable distance. Our names, strangely unfamiliar, floated through the mulberry shade like phantoms in a dream. Slowly we disbanded.

Back doors squeaked open, slammed shut. Mothers in time-honored stance, arms akimbo, eyes flashing, mouths pursed. "My God!" reverberated throughout the neighborhood, as each mother caught sight of each mulberried child. "Just look at yourself! You'll be purple for days! You can't go to church tomorrow looking like a savage! You'll just have to stay home by yourself!"

In our separate kitchens, we sighed in unison, one great feigned dismay.

Thereafter, as long as mulberry season lasted, we gathered, religiously, every Saturday evening at the mulberry trees to perform our pagan ritual. In this way, we eluded the Reverend's sanctimonious sermonizing and spared ourselves a ton of scriptural memorization.

Praise God from whom all mulberries flow.

When I Was Four

Cia Larvick

I sat at the table with my chair pushed all the way in, swinging my feet back and forth aimlessly above the floor. I stared at my plate. Off to one side sat three very large and very green brussels sprouts. I was told that I shouldn't have saved them for last. I should have eaten them with the rest of my food. But I hadn't, and there they were.

"Eat them." I was brought back from my thoughts of wishing we had a dog that would sit patiently under the table, to the present, where my mother watched and waited for me to follow through with her order.

Did dogs ever attempt to eat such things? I didn't know.

"You're going to eat them." I speared one with my fork and eyed it suspiciously. I had no choice. We had no dog and my mother was on kitchen patrol. I knew that she meant business, too. So, one by one I put them in my mouth and began chewing them into bits that I could swallow. The only problem was— I couldn't swallow! It seemed as though my throat had thickly closed up, refusing to open enough to swallow anything that repulsive to its owner.

I chewed and chewed until I had a wad of green mass packed into the side of my cheek. I chanced a glance at my mother, hoping for some sympathy in my plight. My hopes were immediately shot down by the rays of heat radiating from her eyes.

"Swallow," she said tonelessly.

"I can't, Mom," I whined.

"Don't lie," she scolded me. "Just do what I tell you."

Did she even for a minute think that I enjoyed keeping them in my mouth any longer than I had to? I wanted to swallow just to be rid of them. But I couldn't.

"You're going to be in trouble, young lady, if you don't hurry up and swallow those brussels sprouts."

"Mom, I can't! I already told you. My throat—"

I was interrupted before I could finish explaining.

"Okay! That's it. You go to your room right now. You get in your bed," she continued, "and don't come out until you have swallowed those brussels sprouts!"

I sat on my bed. I sat for what seemed hours, occasionally attempting to swallow again. I don't think I would have been able to even swallow something like jello, then. I just could not do it. I sat and sat, and grew sleepier and—

I awoke the next morning , blinking my dreams away. "Good morning," my mother said cheerfully as she entered the room.

"Good morning," I replied quietly. "Mom?" I had just one question for her, but I wasn't sure I should ask. "Mom? Can I spit them out now?"

Annaclair Summer

The grass is
deep,
ripe,
green,
as only midsummer grass
can be.
And I sit in the grass
surrounded
by the verdant smell
of early July.

My crayons are beside me
in a beautiful
black
box
with silver letters
on the lid:
Annaclairs.

I love to hold that box,
velvety black,
richly silver,
once home to
Mother's Christmas chocolates,
now home
to my jumble of crayons.

Meanwhile.
Back from fishing,
the grownups crowd into line,
to face the camera,
with their string of
irridescent fish,
glittering,
blue and silver captives
on a narrow rope.

My mother stands
radiant,
somehow separate,
I know she carries my brother
close,
beneath her heart.
Her shirt is full and dark,
blue
like the fish,
black,
like the shade,
tent-like
over the swell of her adbomen.

Soon,
I won't be the only one.
Soon,
I may have to share
my Annaclair box.
Now,
I am content
to color.

Lissa Lane-Johnson

Pet "Boo"

Early in the morning, I hear a baby cry
Sleepily, then, I leave my bed with a sigh
Open her door, "Good morning," I say.
I dress her for a brand new day.
A tiny little girl—just a baby yet,
A miniature person—She's the family pet.

She crawls faster—FASTER—gaining on me
Reaches her destination, balances on knees.
Small feline paws on the back of my legs—
"Please hold me," her bright eyes beg.
I pick her up, give her a pat
Carry her around like a bright-eyed cat
(She certainly is curious like that!)

A puppy, now, she crawls about
Opens her mouth so her tongue hangs out.
I eat a peach and hungry eyes stare.
So I set her on my lap, happy to share.

Then off she goes, scampering on all fours
The stinker, little tease, playful squirrel I adore.
One last look from her brown-squirrel eyes
Quickly crawls up stairs larger than her small size.
She's the cat, the puppy, the squirrel I see
It was like that all summer for "Boo" and me.

Cia Larvick

Daydreams

Early sunlight floats in through glass and curtains,
lining the edges of the top of the staircase—
turning them into steps
of the great
pyramid,

Early sunlight bleaches blonde hair white
on one side of the boy sitting
on the landing.

Warmed wooden floorboards—
the stage of mind's play
in lands far away.

Whispers of secrets—
walls will never say.

Hannah Gravatt

Boy Creature

I prayed each night for a baby sister.
We'd play barbies, dolls, house—
Talk, share a room—
Gang up on my older brother.

Mommy said her swollen mound moved.
In curiosity, I reached out to lightly touch it,
then pulled back.
I was but a child waiting for a sister.

Waiting, I played and played—
like We would do someday.

Daddy telephones, saying we have
a new baby
Boy!

But—it—must—be—a—
mistake.
I prayed for a,
a sister.

Hot tears trickle
down
my
flushed
cheeks.

God, you didn't keep the promise.

He's behind the curtained window,
Daddy says.

Gentle, closed eyes
Pink body, tiny and still in the
fuzzy blue blanket
Pale pink lips
Precious and curled little fingers
Soft eyelashes
Flat, pudgy nose
Fine threads of light brown hair

This—is my new baby brother.

Nancy Heilman

The Mud-Colored Man

Rachel Searcy

The shelves towered above me alive with reds, whites, blues, purples, and greens that beckoned my interest. Thumb in mouth I eyed them curiously as we rolled, stopped, rolled, and stopped again through the not-so crowded aisle. What an adventure! I had never before seen so many bright bags, boxes, jugs, and bottles. I wondered what it all meant. Did all these things belong to me?! "Mine, Mommy, mine!" I squealed as we wheeled past cookies, cereal, doughnuts, meats, and vegetables.

Mommy interrupted the roll-stop pattern for a moment and began touching some metal barrels with round circles and smiley faces on them. I giggled a little because I liked those! They were my favorite. Mommy stood there for the longest time, picked one up, put it down, picked another one up, put it down again. How strange! I was bored and didn't understand so I decided it was time to set off on my own.

With high gear foot action and a few grunts and groans, I was able to budge the cart and make my way down the immense aisle. When an intriguing blue box came into view, I stopped the cart with noisy clatters and stood on my tippy toes to reach for it. But something unfamiliar grabbed my attention and I halted in what seemed like mid-air. A black arm, yes I guess it was an arm, was reaching for a similar box. My heart drummed loudly as I anxiously fixed my eyes upon the dark arm, gradually moving them up the thick black neck, and onto an also black face. People were different colors too?! I'd never seen a dark person. Was this man real? The face was warm and smiling and I had to find out so reached from the cart and slid my tiny fingers along his arm. Yep. He was real- He felt like Daddy.

Mommy came now and she and the mud-colored man knowingly grinned at each other with a twinkle in their eyes. I wasn't afraid anymore. Perhaps people, like the foods on the shelves, came in all different colors too.

Squirrelly

Crunching annoyingly,
Hidden high in the tree,
Targeting your nut
Directly
At me.

Tricia Abrahamson

Beetle

Dressed in his hard black leotard,
Lying on his back,
Stretching and kicking,
Stretching and kicking.
Accidentally choosing
The hard white floor
Over a springy blue exercise mat.
Bicycle peddling.
One, two. One, two.
Legs moving faster,
Never ceasing—though
Exhausted.
Now again,
Stretching and kicking—
This time for life.

Wynette Terpstra

Caterpillar

Struggling
upwards on
a road
of green,
a black
and orange
jester
inches
his
way—
costumed
to join
other
revelers in
celebration
of life at the
red-petaled
pinnacle.

Wendy Muller

Apple Cider

Fall afternoon
cold, brisk, and windy,
making cider while
listening to football games
on a small portable radio.
Numb hands,
sticky fingers
dumping red and green apples
into sharp turning teeth,
Watching red shred open to white.
Splashes of brown juice
spotting warm flannel shirts and nylon jackets
Turning a crank, squeezing apple shreds tight.
Juice running through narrow slots
into clean, white, five-gallon buckets,
rushed to the house to be frozen for the winter.

Wynette Terpstra

Half Moon

Jaded streams trickle
through willows' sweet seclusion.
Here pebbles glisten.

Ruth Koob

Two Haiku

A Prism

Colored tints of light
illuminate the sill,
dancing with the leaves.

The Clothesline

The dew drops are hung
along spaces between clothes.
Nature fills the void.

Rachel Van Kalsbeek

The Fall

(two haiku)

Harvest moon shine down
on young lovers under an
autumn star-lit sky.

Fall ushers in love;
victims stroll nestled, smitten
as by a brisk wind.

Brenda Renes

Why Write

Lisa Prichard

I had heard that Mrs. Cleaver was an easy grader. "Good deal," I thought, "I can slack off in this class." And I did. Our first assignment was to write a descriptive paper on a magazine photo. I didn't put much time into writing the paper, but why?—she is an easy grader. My "A-no-problem" paper turned out to be a B+ mediocre paper, and it felt mediocre. That stung. I knew I could do better, and I wanted to show her. Through the process of proving to her that I was a good writer, I proved it to myself. My next essays were full of green ink of praise. I doubt whether my papers were of genius level as she made me feel; but the more she praised, the more I tried, and the more confidence I had to try it differently. That was when I realized the joy and satisfaction of writing for myself.

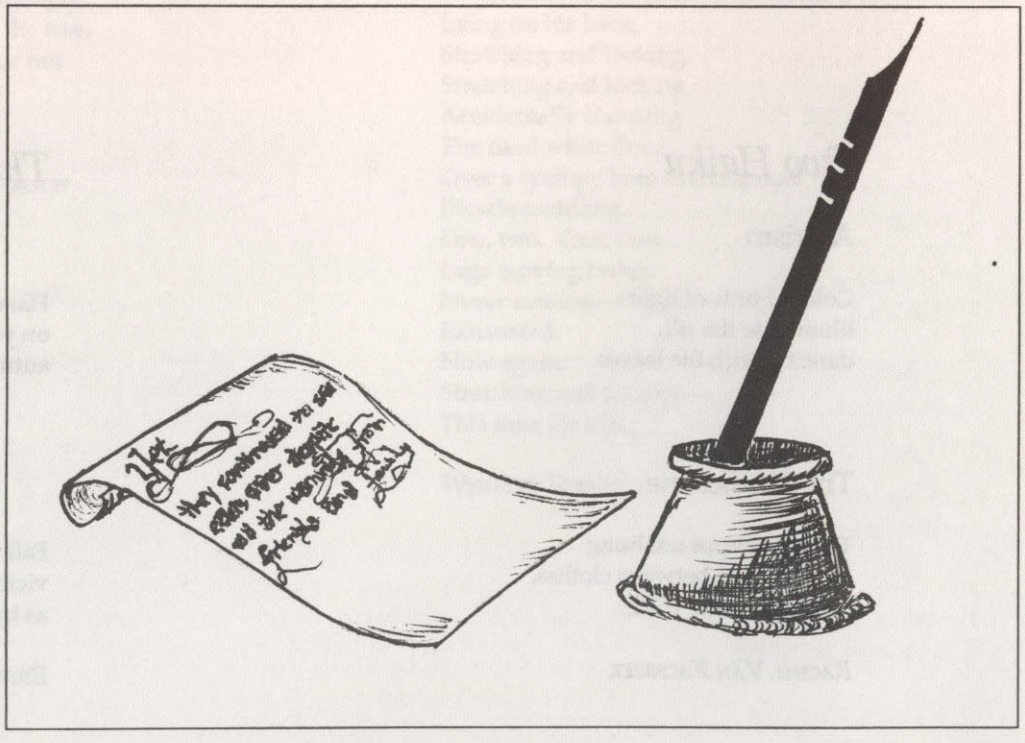
My journals started out as being written in left-over school notebooks. Aesthetically, they were not pleasing. But, they served their purpose. Last Christmas I received a beautiful pink cloth-covered journal. I stopped using it around April because my dark thoughts were making a mockery of those little white hearts on pink background. Looking back at my entries, it seems that anyone who reads them would conclude that I was a depressed person who led an unhappy life. That would not be an accurate conclusion. But, I have no one in my journal to impress; I need only to share with myself and God. I can put on my worn-out sweat shirt and scream if I want. And I have. I have written about the hateful days of the summer of 1987 when I wasn't sure if I would decide on a college before September. And, the hopelessly wasted, humid day when everyone in the family was on each other's nerves, and little differences seemed irreconcilable.

Months can pass between my entries, but I always come back. Like a good friend, my journal is waiting for me when I need to sort out questions or emotions that won't fit anywhere else. By shaping my aimless feeling into words, I can work with them instead of feeling overpowered by them. I can remember coming home from high school just seconds away from tears. Kurt Snay, the reason for my existence, was walking with Amy Makoben, the girl that never wore the same outfit twice. All my hopes were killed; I knew that I was destined to spend my life alone. But, instead of wallowing in complete self pity, I took out my notebook and wrote about it. Not only did I write about it, I laughed about it and realized that Kurt Snay was only a boy, no more than that.

Writing has helped me capture a time. My favorite piece is about my grandma's farm. In it I describe the farm and some of my memories connected with it. Those words will always help me recall the "clink" of the pig feeders, the times we jumped from the granary catwalks into the grain, and the love wrapped in my grandma's eyes. And, the memories of my brother sitting on the gate, holding my grandma's red hymnal, preaching to the cows and the surprise of finding tiny fish in the pond by the bridge come alive as I write about them.

Writing has helped me realize who I am. A favorite line in one of my journal entries is "...and the fairy tale ending jumped out the window and splat on the sidewalk." Sort of demented, but I can see real strength in the words. It is saying that things are not going as idealistically as I always believed they would. But, I am not letting it defeat me; I am seeing it as it is, and I am laughing at it and living it. In a busy day I do not actively reflect on who I am or why I respond as I do. Writing has given me the motivation to find time to escape from the details of the real world, to spend time writing down my thoughts and reflecting on what is happening around me. By seeing myself from a different perspective in my writing, I have gained a better understanding and appreciation for myself.

Writing has been a journey for me—or at least something that has helped me a long the way.



Journey Into Eternity

Michele Koopmans

Miles of blackness stretched out before me as I sat crouched as far to the front of the car as possible. I couldn't see anything from the back! The thick blackness was separated by yellow dashes and white lines. Occasional menacing bright eyes glared at me as they zoomed by.

I became bored and restless as the hours dragged on. My back became stiff from crouching towards the front and my eyelids began to droop from the weight of oncoming sleep. I asked, "Are we there yet?" Of course the answer was no. I began to daydream and play connect the twinkling dots to the beautiful bright stars and the hazy white moon. A dense mist began to appear and the frightful eyes of the oncoming cars became fuzzy. I wasn't sure where we were going or exactly how much longer I would have to ride in this prison on wheels.

My little brother was curled into a tiny ball in the corner, sound asleep, unaware of the continuous miles of our journey. I began to wonder where the other cars were going. They weren't all going the same direction we were. They had different places to go and people to see. I began to picture other little girls riding in the back anxious to get out of the car. There were other children who were tired of leaning forward so that they could see out of the front window.

If all those cars had a family in them, then there were other people who had very important things to do just like me. Some could be from California or Florida and live by the beach and have friends at school just like I did!

As I sat back in my seat I began to wonder if other children were thinking the same thing I was. Were they wondering about me and realizing that there are a lot of people out there with separate lives? My family seemed to be such a small part of this world.

The monotonous white lines became a blur and the moon continued to follow me as I fell asleep with thoughts running through my dreams of other children in other places with separate lives.

The Gift

Teeth chattering—
I stand on the shore
looking at a cold, black ocean.
It looks foreboding—
I shiver in the bareness and wrap
my arms around myself in an effort to
warm.
The waves whip in a feeding-frenzy
searching for their next victim.
In my five o'clock moring state
I wait for sunrise unwillingly.

Minutes earlier, I had
fought—allied with sheets and blankets
in refusal to leave my warm cove
but Angie was insistant.
So now, I am standing on shore
peering through encrusted eyes
We sit close—
I can hear her rythmic breathing.
I peer to the horizon and grumpily
wait for the fabled sunrise

Suddenly-
streamers of burgundy, gold, and fuchsia
cast their aura in magical patterns
across the water.
They dart back and forth
coloring the world while pulling
the fiery red ball upwards
Slowly, the sun rises
straining to bathe the world
and free it from the darkness.

Cast in a glow of rose,
I am enchanted.
The world is magical.
No longer grey clouds and black night
But a kaleidoscope of colors.
God's gift.

Wendy Muller

Surges

Ruth Koob

Faded hollyhocks droop along the garden wall. A weary, dappled dog sags, circling a tree. Even the houses slump in the heat of this August afternoon of my eleventh summer, just past the whining of the supper-time siren. All the neighborhood has gathered around kitchen tables, but my chair is empty. I sit here, instead, on a dusty curb, elbows on knees, chin in cupped hands, waiting with awful expectancy.

Birds, by instinct, slowly silence. Locusts tune their myriad cadences inward. Yellow-green clouds, eerily aglow, roll southward, trailing electric energy. Thunder rumbles its language indecipherable.

Suddenly, an inner illumination of lightning bolt intensity jolts me up off the curb and onto my feet—Other people don't see the world the way I do—they look and look and never see—but I am different—I can see into, beyond, over, under, around, and through—I have a special Vision!

I am joy, self-embracing, spinning in the street kaleidoscopically.

But the rolling thunder is a warning, and with an almost-woman intuition, I know beyond all doubt—I will be alone in my Vision and lonely in the world.

I am solitude, self-assuring, standing in the street prophetically.

Yellow-green clouds are rushing, still rushing southward, illuminations flashing through my mind—Yes, I will be alone—but not lonely—just look at these clouds—who could ever feel lonely beneath a Gauguin sky?

Bursting into a lightning dash down the long, empty street, the long corridor of time, I am half laughing, half sobbing, totally singing. I am exalted. I am one with the universe, eerily aglow, racing the wind, pacing the discovery.

Once Upon A Rock

A crow watches upon a rock.
Slick, black feathers
arrogantly shine.
Seeing something
far away,
but sensing
something close.
A quick jerk
and something connects.
A quick twitch
and there is just a rock.

Rachel Van Kalsbeek

Cloudless

concrete
slams against
the town's water tower
crushes
a tin roof
stands sentinel
on the horizon
pours blue
over acres of corn
fills in cracks
between swaying branches.

Hannah Gravatt

Electrostatic Equinox

Long past luminescent windows,
well into midnight,
amber street lights all aglow
slowly circuit October,
misty arcs diffusing
into mapleness,
shimmering on leaves pulsing
with incandescent currents,
spreading auras 'round in halos
far into forever:
circle on circle on circle.

Ruth Koob

Uncle Dennis

Hannah Gravatt

He was just Uncle Dennis—a wanderer my father had worked with in Missouri at the Ball jar factory. Some would describe him as a leftover hippie from the tie-dyed, bell-bottomed, marijuana era—hardly a candidate for significant othership. I'm sure people stared—probably in horror—at his almost gaunt and overly freckled face that was framed by a red-orange afro that "went out-to-there."

I imagine conscientious mothers in the grocery store thinking to themselves, "Those poor children!" as we skipped around the store with him on the prowl for the best ingredients for real Italian spaghetti. He prided himself in this culinary talent, the proof lasting days on our red-stained mouths.

There are pictures of us in an old shoe box—Uncle Dennis' skinny frame behind two blonde girls on their tricycles, their eyelids plastered with gaudy blue eye shadow (the eye shadow and fake movie-star eyelashes courtesy of Uncle Dennis). The gaudy blue matched the giant turquoise rings covering his long bony fingers. There is another picture—the little sister's first birthday party—her face and Uncle Dennis' finger both in the cake. Between Polaroid shots is a row of four black and white K-Mart photo booth pictures—a series of changing facial contortions, curious teeth and tongues, eyes wrinkled with laughter or bulging on purpose and Uncle Dennis' big hair cut off at the top.

Years later, he sent a letter to his old friends—to our Iowa farmhouse—where he and Mom did macrame in the front yard . . . where home-made bluegrass festivals went long into the night . . . where marijuana brownies baked and spaghetti noodles boiled. It wasn't until later that we understood why we couldn't have any of those brownies and why Mom reprimanded Dad and Uncle Dennis for making them.

The name and address on the left-hand corner of the envelope was unfamiliar. We wondered, "Dennis who?"

When Mom translated it "Uncle Dennis," warm summer nights, curly red hair, spaghetti, and fiddle music spilled from the open envelope. I pictured us—once again three little girls sitting on Uncle Dennis' lap pulling gently on his red curls and trying, without success to count his freckles. We would sit up late at night braiding each other's damp blonde hair so that, after sleeping on it, it would friz just like Uncle Dennis'.

The leaf

Whirling downward,
showing dark then light
the leaf falls—until it
shatters the mirror like surface
sending ever widening circle signals
to join the numerous others of its kind
who are caught in a mirror trap
carried along a frightful conveyor belt
to a destination unknown
save
one.

Wendy Muller

Garden Hose

The lengthy green snake lies
motionless on the lifeless
gray and white pebbles
sleeping comfortably coiled in the
afternoon sun until a little boy
squeezes its metal head and the serpent
awakens in hissing dance and
slithers across the browning grass,
its translucent tongue
showering the world green.

Rachel Searcy

Opera Fantasy

Linda Wihtsell

The order at the Dairy Dandy Drive-in was always the same. Most of the time the brunette waitress had the order ready when Linda and her mother arrived because she worked every Thursday night and knew they would be coming in. Their order consisted of at least four malts: two small chocolates, one small strawberry, and one large chocolate. Occasionally they would have to inform the waitress that they needed one more small chocolate. It depended on whether or not Linda's oldest brother went cruising with his friends after church or not. However, this Thursday night was different.

It was a cold January night when Linda's mother picked her up from church. It was just the two of them because for some unknown reason her brothers went cruising TOGETHER. Slowly and with much ease, Linda and her mother drove through the snow packed streets to the Dairy Dandy. Linda sat in the front seat, from where her eleven year old frame could barely see over the dashboard, dreaming of a chocolate malt as big as their beige Oldsmobile. Upon arriving at the Dairy Dandy, they were surprised that their regular waitress was not waiting to greet them with a smile. Instead, a red haired teenager came to the window and peered through the glass. With a high-pitched voice, which surprisingly did not crack the glass, she said, "May I take your order?" With a twinkle in her eye and the corners of her mouth turned up slightly, Linda's mother stepped forward to respond: "Yes, we'll have three malts. One small strawberry; one small chocolate; and one large chocolate." Linda thought maybe she could have that huge malt she had dreamed of earlier, a medium, since her brothers were not along, but no such luck.

Tightly gripping the cardboard container with the malts, Linda again sat next to her mother in the front seat of the car. Her eyes wandered out of the side window to the gray tree branches with snow clinging to them in the wind. Turning to her mom, Linda told a story, "Mom, did you know that we're driving through a winter wonderland where Frosty the Snowman is coming to visit. He ain't going to melt here though because he's going to have a built-in freezer in him that will keep him really cold."

Linda's mother grinned proudly at her youngest child, "Oh, you think so, do you. Well, we better keep a lookout for him." They never saw Frosty before Linda's mother made the final turn of the steering wheel and parked the beige Oldsmobile outside the huge brick edifice with flashing marquee lights outlining the words "STAR WARS." Linda sat in the front seat wondering if her mom decided to change a tire before she opened the door and took the malts out of her hands. Finally, with haste, Linda got out of the car, pushed the lock button down, and ran to the four large glass doors spread across the front of the building. She picked the second one from the right and tugged with all of her strength to open it.

Linda's body shuddered as she saw all of the familiar sights. The black ticket booth in the front lobby stood isolated with only the actors' faces from posters staring at it. It was a black robot surrounded by the enemy. Onward was the second lobby which was a bigger room than the first. Before the movie started, people always stood around smoking their cigarettes or they were at the concession stand buying popcorn, pop, and candy. But, more important, on the right side of the lobby was a door with windows leading diagonally upward revealing a staircase. Linda pulled open the creaky door, and with her mother at her heels, climbed the thirty-three steps. Upon reaching the last step, a long, burgundy, velvet curtain hung down from the top of a doorway. Pushing the velvet aside, Linda stepped into the balcony.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness except for the light from the picture moving on the huge screen in front and below her. As a matter of fact, it was just enough light to allow an eleven year old to see something she shouldn't: "Who would want to kiss anyway?" she thought. The balcony had three levels of deep burgundy seats that extended both to her right and to her left about one hundred feet if she stood in the center. A steel railing was bolted to the balcony's edge, and Linda leaned over it to find out how big the crowd was that night. Not very many, but that was usual for a Thursday night because it was the last night of that particular movie. By the time Thursday night arrived, almost everyone had come to see it.

Linda loved to look down on the people and see what they were doing. She felt like the only spy who could remain in plain sight and not be caught. She could see if anyone pulled out a machine gun and intended to kill everyone there. If so, she knew she'd jump over the railing, tackle the person, and wrestle for the weapon. Ultimately, she'd become the hero and save everyone. The balcony looked down into the main auditorium where the same deep burgundy seats were lined in curved rows. There were three sections of these rows with two long aisles in between them. On the edge of these aisles in the last seat of the row were oil lamps that offered light to those who needed to find their way back to their seat after getting more popcorn or candy. These two aisles led to the stage where the screen was framed by two more velvet curtains that looked like curtains from the window of a giant's house. Linda thought to herself, "Somewhere in this old theater lives a mean old giant who wants to be left alone. Sometime he's going to get sick of everyone coming here and right in the middle of one of those horror movies, he's going to come out of the screen and pick everyone up in one hand and crush 'em. I sure hope it ain't on a Thursday night." The stage was also surrounded by a steel railing to match the balcony's, and over the edge of this railing was the pit which had two small doors on each end.

Linda was exposed to more than just teenagers kissing in the balcony if she looked up to the ceiling that seemed to extend close to the stars. The giant must have been an artist who wanted a taste of what it was like to be Michelangelo. The ceiling was divided into square sections. Each section had a different scene painted on it, but on the very center square of the ceiling was painted a nude woman holding a rose in her left hand among bushes. The giant must have been

somewhat of a Romantic.

Suddenly, Linda realized that her mom still had her malt, and it was probably melting to nothing but flavored milk. "Oh, wouldn't that be cool if cows could make colored milk. We could have blue and purple and black and green milk. Cool!" Linda whispered aloud. Linda scurried along the back wall of the balcony and up a narrow flight of stairs and entered a hallway even narrower than the stairs. The giant must not ever go there. He wouldn't fit. This hallway was unique because it had graffiti written on its walls, and nobody was bothered by it. It was tradition that if you worked at the theater, you wrote something on the wall and signed your name and the year. Blue, red, green, yellow, orange, black, purple—all the colors of the rainbow and more were spray painted on the wall, the same colors the milk could be. As Linda walked through the hallway, she found her name on the wall. There it was just before she entered the next room.

Light came streaming out of the room, and it was hard for Linda's eyes to adjust so quickly to it. When she finally did, there he stood—her dad, the Movie Man. The gigantic film projectors hummed as they worked the film through all of their gears. "I bet the giant watches movies all night long after everybody goes home," Linda said to her dad. He was sipping his malt through the straw. Then, swallowing, he said, "What did you say? You better hurry up and take this malt before I get to it first." He chuckled. Occasionally, he'd go peer through the little windows that looked out onto the screen to make sure the picture was still in focus and on line. If it wasn't, which was seldom for him, he'd quickly fix it before anyone realized something was wrong. Linda sat on a stool that enabled her to see through one of the windows, sipped her malt, looked around for a sight of the giant, and watched the end of the movie. Every so often she glanced at the couple making out. "Dumb movie," she said to the Movie Man when the credits rolled on the screen.

Linda went back out onto the balcony and watched the few people file up the aisles and out of the auditorium. All of the house lights were on now, and she could see the popcorn boxes, candy wrappers, paper cups, and even money lying on the floor. She heard her dad calling her, "Linda?"

"Yeah."

"You stay and wait while your Mom and I carry down these film reels."

"Okay," she responded, only hearing half of what he said. She was already thinking of where the giant could be in the old "opera house turned movie theater." Her body shivered as she wondered how many of the opera singers he had captured and eaten for a snack. She was off to play detective.

Linda descended the balcony stairs back onto the main floor and headed into the auditorium. Janice, one of the girls who worked in the concession stand, was bending between the rows picking up the big pieces of trash, like the popcorn boxes and paper cups. The pit had always fascinated Linda. One reason was because she could vividly imagine the orchestra seated there playing background music for the singer on the stage. Another reason was because of those two small doors on each end of it. She had been told never to go through them, but she was an eleven year old not listening to instructions and on the lookout for the permanent resident in her dad's movie theater. "He should pay rent," she thought to herself. Linda picked the door on her right mostly because she wrote, ate, batted, and threw with her right hand. The door was intended to open inward, but it was stuck until she pushed her weight against it. The door popped open, and cold air rushed out on her face from the dark unknown. She felt more daring than ever and even more curious to find the giant.

The air was musty and damp, and she kept moving along the narrow passageway with both hands on the cement walls to guide her. Cobwebs clung to her fingers and hair. She groped her way through the dark for approximately fifty feet, and boom! She ran into a cement wall. The passageway ended. Suddenly, she remembered her mom saying something about an underground tunnel which led to the old hotel across the street for the opera singers to walk to and fro in, never having to go outside, but she never said where it was. "This must be it," she said aloud, "but then the giant must not live in here. Unless he has magical powers and can walk through this wall and go into the old hotel." Her voice bounced off of the cement surrounding her on three sides. She slouched down on the cold floor and thought about waiting for the giant to come back through the wall. But she knew that her mom and dad would be waiting for her and wondering where she was at.

On the way home that night Linda never told her mom and dad that she had gone into the tunnel. They asked her where she had disappeared to for awhile. "Nowhere. I was just helping Janice pick up garbage," she replied. The beige Oldsmobile pulled into the garage, and the three of them hurried into the house. The air nipped at their noses harder than before, and it was past Linda's bedtime. Her mother scurried her off to bed and both her mom and dad came in to say goodnight. After her dad left the room, Linda looked up at her mother's pink face and said in a quiet voice, "Mom, have you ever been in that tunnel you told me about in the theater?"

"What has brought about this curiosity?" she asked.

"Oh, I was just wondering."

"Well, to tell you the truth, yes, I have. Once I snuck down without Dad knowing. You know he doesn't like it when people go down there. It's dangerous. If something would happen, no one would think to look down there for you. Anyway, I snuck down there, and when I reached the cement wall the city built to close it up, I sat and daydreamed for awhile. I just think that it is neat that our theater was once an opera house. Don't you?"

Linda drifted off to sleep that night with thoughts of the theater in her head. She and her mom were keeping the same secret—they had both gone where they shouldn't have. But did her mom know about the giant too? Linda's body lost all consciousness, and soon she was back in the opera house. Her blurred, unconscious eye saw a singer standing on stage with the velvet curtains in the background. He had on a black tuxedo and a white scarf around his neck. His body frame was larger than usual. Every seat in the auditorium and the balcony was occupied and the audience applauded wildly. He bowed, exited the stage, and before entering the underground passageway, turned for one last acknowledgment. Through the fuzzy blur of vision came the revelation of an oversized figure hauntingly smiling at the crowd. He crouched down, tucked his head toward his chest so he would not hit his head, and disappeared through the doorway. The giant does live in the tunnel.

Strange Willie

Rachel Van Kalsbeek

The bus terminal was filthy. Candy wrappers and coffee cups were everywhere. There were no windows, and the floor had a certain stick to it. But I didn't care. It suited my mood—dark and dingy. I wanted my parents to feel that they were making the biggest mistake of their lives. How could they send me to my grandparents' house? I had never even met them before. All I knew was that my grandfather was considered strange by everyone I knew. So why were my parents sending me there? Was this some form of punishment? To my recollection, it wasn't anything I had done. Sure, there was the jello in the bathtub incident, but I thought the tub looked better pink anyway. And, the fire in my bedroom hadn't been that big. How was I supposed to know that cat fur burned so fast? Anyway, the cat was fine, and I like my curtains shorter.

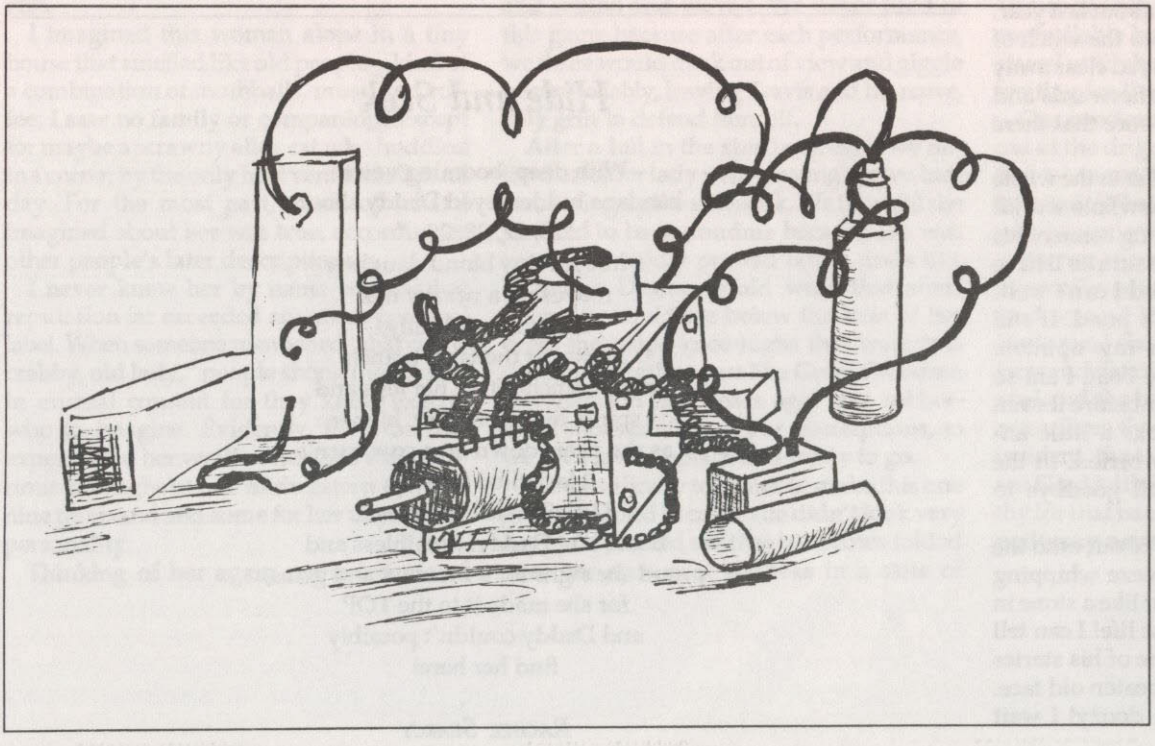
I wasn't going to smile at them. As I boarded the bus, I gave my parents the biggest frown I could muster. That would get them. In a week, they would feel so guilty they would be begging me to come home. But, they just waved goodbye, and I started to feel a little sick.

As I looked around, I realized that the bus was surprisingly clean. Also, the woman next to me had on a sweet smelling perfume. The trip wasn't going to be bad at all. I could probably live through it. It wasn't long before the terminal was in sight. As we approached it, I began to wonder what would happen if I didn't get off the bus. But I knew my grandparents would be waiting for me.

I had never seen them before so I was a bit nervous as I stepped off the bus. However, before I had a chance to take five steps, they were in front of me. "Hello Billy," said the person who had to be my grandmother. She was a thin, gray-haired lady wearing a dress and apron. She had the sort of smile that warmed my insides like hot chocolate on a cold day. She hugged me and told me to call her Grandma Jo. She then introduced me to my grandfather, Willie. Until then, he had stood in the background, but now he stepped forward as if for inspection. So this was my strange grandfather. He looked awkward next to Grandma Jo. He was a little on the plump side and wore big bibbed overalls. His left ear stood out, but his right ear was pressed normally to the side of his head giving him an off-balance look. Nobody said anything. Grandpa just stood there grinning a full-toothed smile.

Finally, Grandma Jo explained that he was bashful toward new people. However, once he got to know them, he couldn't be shut up. It was getting dark so we headed toward what was to be my home for the next month. Even though I was with strangers in a strange car going to a strange place, I felt comfortable.

The car stopped. As I looked out the window, I saw an enormous house. Could it be that only two people lived in that house? The answer to my question came right away. "Since the children left, we only use the downstairs. We think it's more cozy that way," said Grandma Jo. Willie took my bags out of the trunk and led the way into the house.



By now, it was dark, and I suddenly realized how tired I had become. Grandma Jo must have sensed this. She said the tour of the house could wait until morning and showed me to the room which was to be mine. I don't remember thinking about much before I fell asleep except that for some reason, I wasn't mad at my parents anymore.

The sun filtered into the room through a hole in the shade. It hit my eyes perfectly so I was blinded for a few seconds before I actually woke up. As my eyes began to focus, I examined the room. It must have belonged to a boy. The walls were covered with hunting pictures and

tips for better shooting. Along one wall, was an empty gun cabinet that I guessed was once full of guns. It kind of reminded me of the house. Once, it was full of children, but now it mostly sits empty. I heard my grandmother in the kitchen and thought I would check it out. My stomach was telling me it was time for breakfast.

The aroma of coffee was mixed with something strange. I couldn't quite place the smell. "Good morning, Billy," said Grandma Jo. "Mornin'," said Willie. It was the first word he had said to me so far. For some reason, it gave me a good feeling. As I sat at a place apparently set for me, I realized what the smell was. Sitting on Willie's plate, next to his scrambled eggs was a small bowl of chili. I hoped that menu wasn't for everyone. I didn't think my stomach could take that in the morning. Out of the blue, Willie said, "Have a bowl of chili, son. I guarantee it will keep you going for the rest of the day." I didn't know what sense to take that in, but I didn't push it any further. By now, I was seeing why everyone called Willie strange.

For the month that I was there, breakfast remained about the same. Every morning Willie ate his eggs and chili. I soon learned, however, to go to the bathroom before breakfast. After the meal, it belonged to Willie and took about half a day before it smelled normal again.

For the first part of the month, I spent my days mostly with Grandma Jo. Basically, we worked in the back yard fixing an old play yard set and trimming old trees. Every once in a while, I would see Willie wandering from barn to barn carrying odd bits of wood, metal and pipe. Grandma Jo said she didn't know what he was doing, but she didn't care because it kept him busy.

The next day, instead of working in the backyard, I walked to the barn I had heard noises coming out of earlier. Inside, I walked through old hog pens, rooms of bailing wire, and old farm odds and ends. Finally, I saw Willie.

As I walked into the room where Willie was working, I couldn't believe my eyes. A machine sat in the middle of the room. It had a square, metal base that sat in a wheel barrow. Pipes, wires and gadgets of every color stuck out of every inch of it. To me, it looked like a tangled mess. My mother would go into conniptions if I ever made anything like it, although my room had resembled it in the past.

Willie looked startled as I walked into the room. Maybe I should have asked before I barged in. Well, it was too late now. "What are you making?" I asked Willie. "To tell you the truth, I really don't know." He went on to explain that he basically added stuff here and there until at the end of the day he would see if it still worked. "Mainly," he said, "it keeps me out of Jo's hair and we get along much better at night. The children used to keep us busy, but since they left we only have each other."

I spent every afternoon with Willie working on the machine. I learned that it had started out a broken tractor engine and had developed into the unique mess it was today. At first, I just watched Willie work. He would sit and contemplate the machine. Then, as if divinely inspired would hustle to a certain building, get some scrap of something and add it to the machine. The entire process repeated itself throughout the day. I wished someone would talk. It was too quiet when the cows stopped mooing and the chickens took their naps. The next afternoon my wish came true.

As I entered the manure-rich laboratory, Willie greeted me with something that stopped me in my tracks. "Never stand next to a one-eyed cow, Billy. They're none too stable." What did that mean? Whatever, I felt like it was my turn to answer. As we were setting up our stools, it struck me to tell him one of my many incidents where I had gotten in trouble. "Ever try to bathe a pig?" Willie looked at me with a peculiar look and then started laughing. He was quiet a minute and then asked, "Want to add a part to the machine?"

From that afternoon on, the machine was a joint effort. For every part Willie added, I added one also. But the biggest thrill was at the end of the afternoon when we tested the machine. Willie would flip the switch, and we would cross our fingers and watch. If it was right, the room would fill with a quiet hum. The pipes would start to quiver, and the motor would spew out a fine white smoke. These were the best of times!

One afternoon, Willie seemed quiet. He didn't offer a strange saying and didn't laugh when I told him a joke. I decided not to press the issue. After a while, Willie looked at me and told me that I reminded him of his boy. Perry was in California now, going to school. He said he had been the last child and it hadn't been the same around the farm since he had left. The rest of the day was strange. Even though we worked in silence, I felt we talked more than we ever had before. That day, Willie turned from a strange, old man into someone special.

I began to dread the day I had to go back home. The days seemed to fly by. The hours we spent working on the machine seemed more like minutes. After that special day in the barn, the machine seemed to draw Willie and me closer every day. Sometimes, I even forgot he was my grandfather. He was more like a friend. However, it was finally time to go home to my parents. At the bus station, Grandma Jo promised to write and send me cookies. But, the hardest part of leaving was saying goodbye to my newly-found friend. Willie shook my hand and acted manly, but as I left the bus terminal, I was sure I saw a tear in his eye.

Aslan's Alive!

Remember...we would sit those winter nights
Up in the blue room with its scratched up, old
Windows—double thick glass soaked up low light?

Then Daddy found our place—uncreased the fold
In a Chronicles of Narnia book
While we got blankets to ward off the cold.

Remember . . . death stole our hope—a mean crook—
When the lion, Aslan, died on cold stone
At the hands of the witch? We could not look.

Then Daddy paused—how late the night had grown—
But with so few pages left, "It's not right . . ."
To leave Aslan on stone—dead, cold, alone.

"Keep reading," we begged, so on burned low light
Even longer into that winter night.

Hannah Gravatt

The Fake Parts

Wendy Muller

My first slumber party I ever had was on Halloween. I excitedly invited three of my friends over to share the wonder of trick-or-treating, bobbing for apples, and the best part, the telling of ghost stories. These three ideas were the epitome of a ten year old's imagination and I wanted my friends to be impressed. My father had other ideas.

My father decided that in order for my slumber party to be complete I needed to have a genuine ghost story. One good enough to scare us all into a screaming mass of confusion.

We were having a great time doing ten year old things like combing our hair, comparing p.j.'s, and counting our booty from trick-or-treating when my father came downstairs and said, "Girls, How would you like to hear an actual ghost story?"

We responded in typical monkey fashion to signify our unanimous approval. We all dashed to our sleeping bags and after much giggling, prepared ourselves for an actual ghost story. I'm not sure what I expected to hear, but what happened was definitely not what I had in mind.

After dimming the lights, my father began the telling of Edgar Allen Poe's, "Tell-Tale Heart." At first the story wasn't that scary and we giggled at its seeming stupidity. Then, father passed around a baggie with a few of the dead man's bones for us to feel. We were getting a little spooked as the story progressed. As each new body part was introduced, my father with his voice low and raspy passed around a new supposed body part. Spaghetti was his substitute for brains—nice and slimy. Slightly warmed tomato juice represented the blood. A shaped clump of play-doh was the ever beating heart and pretzels were the bones. My father, by this time, was truly caught up in his storytelling, and he had become oblivious to the ever widening eyes of the four very gullible ten-year-olds listening to his adult-oriented oration.

My best friend Carolyn's face had contorted into a mask of terror. She believed that my father was telling a true story and that he had actually done the killing, hid the body parts, and then dug them up to specially show us on Halloween. With a sudden scream, Carolyn leapt up and ran into the safety of the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

My other two friends, Shelly and MariJo, had been listening in an off-handed manner, until the body parts were passed around. Shelly, then, began making little squeaking noises. I think she was trying to cry, but she was too scared to. I couldn't see her face because she had hidden it in her trembling hands.

MariJo was sitting right beside of me and she reached out to clasp my hand in a grip that left little red slashes from her nails for a week after. She didn't say anything, but her mouth was in a tight line and her eyes were the size of mom's dinner plates. I knew she was as scared as I was. Without warning, She and Shelly dove under a chair. It was as if they had an identical survival instinct at the same time—run and hide!

I sat frozen in fright unable to move. I couldn't believe that my father would tell a story like this. He couldn't make up one this well, but at the same time, he wouldn't have killed anybody. I watched my friends scatter and wasn't sure I shouldn't do the same. Only one problem, I really couldn't move. It was as if someone had dipped me in cement and it had dried. I could see everything, but I couldn't do anything.

Bedlam erupted in the Muller house and my poor father sat there in all his glory of storytelling with no idea what he had done wrong. He had told the story right. Hadn't he?

My mother eventually came down to see what all the screaming was about. She found a mess. My friends were all scattered and cowering in terror. I was loudly blubbering because I didn't believe that my father was a killer even if Carolyn did say he was. And ... my father, by this time, was grinning like a Cheshire cat because he had accomplished his goal of giving us a scary Halloween party.

Mom had quite the job of calming us all down. Most of my friends were delivered home by ten that night and to this day I have never had another slumber party. I guess my father's imagination was above us that Halloween.

It took me about a week after my slumber party to convince Carolyn that my father wasn't a killer. Shelly and MariJo were more understanding, but it was months before any of my friends would come over if my dad was home. Even if we were friends, they weren't quite sure about my dad.

As for me, I was furious at my dad! (That was no small incident either, seeing as I worshipped the ground he walked on.) I was never going to talk to him again because I didn't have any friends and it was all his fault.

I stayed mad at him for two whole days. I'm not sure who was more miserable. My dad was pretty quiet and my mom refused to help things out because she felt I had a right to be mad. I had worked so hard to get things just right for my party. She knew I was trying to impress my friends. Why didn't dad? Served him right that I was mad at him. I think my dad learned something that day. He learned not to push things too far because teasing can hurt.

Roy Takes the Cake

Cia Larvick

They were in love. At least that's what we assumed when my dad told us he was going to marry her. My three younger brothers and I were shocked, to say the least. We thought that she and my dad were just good friends. We hadn't had any idea that he was even close to marriage.

Well, he casually mentioned it over supper one night. It was like a bomb had been dropped and the civil defense sirens were going off: CAROL AND I ARE GETTING MARRIED.

As if that were not enough to drop on us, a few months later, my dad dropped another one. It was as though he was just letting us know some little thing that he had forgotten until that moment. It was about Leroy.

Leroy is my cat. He had been around a while, and my brothers and I had grown to love him. We considered him a part of our family. So, naturally we were upset when my dad casually mentioned (a couple of months after casually mentioning that he was getting married) that we would have to "get rid of Leroy." Carol was allergic to cats. I protested immediately. I said I loved Leroy. He said he loved Carol. I said that was fine with me, as long as we didn't have to get rid of my beloved cat.

Then my dad asked me the dumbest question in the world: "Are you saying that I can't fall in love with a woman who is allergic to cats? Is that what you're telling me?" Well, no—that was not what I said. I only said that I wanted to keep my cat and that my brothers and I, who were his children long before Carol was ever his girlfriend, would consider it an unforgivable thing if we had to give up Roy for Carol.

We had made our message clear to my dad and Carol. They knew how we felt and still planned to marry, totally avoiding the subject of Roy. Someone suggested to my dad that maybe Leroy could be kept in the basement. My brothers and I thought that maybe we could keep Carol in the basement instead. I couldn't even imagine the thought of locking him away in our dungeon of a basement like that! But the thought of Carol down there made me laugh. "Oh," we imagined we'd tell visitors, "We have to keep Carol in the basement, because she's allergic to Leroy."

Well, I told Leroy about the dilemma and how upset my brothers and I were. He listened patiently while soaking up some sun rays in the middle of our living room floor. He didn't react immediately, but instead decided to think it over some. My brothers and I were thinking about it, too. But we were worried.

The day of my dad's wedding came. After the reception, I slowly drove my brothers home. It was about 10:30 pm, and almost time for my two youngest brothers to go to bed. But we stayed up and talked for a while. We talked about Roy and how we were not going to give him up without a fight. Finally, after we were all talked out, we went to bed.

Around 3 am, I got up to go to the bathroom. But before I got there, I heard a noise. I froze, thinking we had an intruder. I peered through the darkness into the kitchen, where the noise came from. A luminous pair of glowing eyes stared at me from where they were suspended in mid air. "Roy, get down off the counter!" I whispered. He knew that was a no-no. Usually, he only walked across the piano keys at night, but he knew that the counter was definitely off-limits. "Roy!" I whispered hoarsely again. He ignored me and his glowing eyes disappeared. The noise started up again.

I decided that I should go see what he was up to. I made my way to the kitchen and turning on a dim light, I found that Roy was still on the counter. He turned in my direction and he was smiling. I think he even winked at me.

What I saw made me laugh so hard, I thought I'd pee my jammies. It was the funniest thing I'd seen, considering the situation. Leroy had frosting all over his face. Evidently, my dad and Carol had left the remains of their wedding cake on the counter, before leaving for their honeymoon. Roy had chewed through the plastic covering it and had been eating their cake. I guess he figured that he would have the last laugh.

My brothers and I still laugh about it. Leroy just acts like it was nothing. But it was. And we got to keep him.

20th Century Mating Rituals

An evening ritual begins
on established cement turf—
guarded ferociously.

A she-lion's
curly blonde mane
blows high in the evening breeze.
Her scented breathing is heavy
over snarling blood-red lips . . .
Claws—pink and sharp—
extend and retract
as she scans
the horizon.

The lioness narrows her eyes
and lifts her head.
A musk-scented breeze
has alerted her.

A low purr
precedes the arrival
of an advancing stud—
two eyes glowing
in the blackness
of night.

Prowler meets prowlee

Unfeigned delight

Brenda Renes

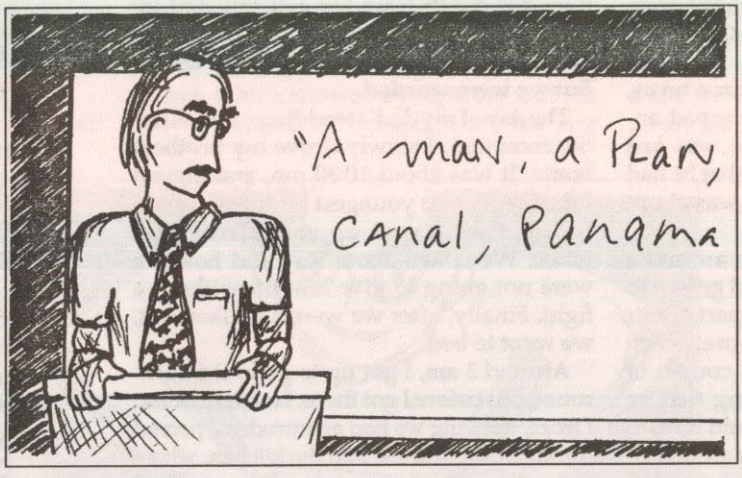
Midtown

Scott Isebrand

For a week, no schedule, no smelly cafeteria, no smelly roommate, no stress. Instead, heckticness would be replaced by the bliss of hap-hazard escapades around Newton: Chinese food and fun with friends. But one friend in particular, Mr. Ronald Prahl, my high school mentor—the closest thing to a man of letters I know—I looked most forward to seeing.

As soon as I unpacked at home I bounded into the little silver Honda Civic and raced to the high school smiling to myself knowing Mr. Prahl would make time for me as he always used to. I parked and leapt out of the clicking Civic. Rain pelted my trench coat; my journal and other writing from college were safely tucked under my arm. I especially wanted Mr. Prahl to critique my children's story.

Up the stairs and to the left. Not wanting to be accosted by curious high-schoolers I kept my collar up and my eyes down. Finally his classroom door, the gateway into the haven I so often sought at the end of ridiculous and trivial high school days.



Entering Prahl's domain was always to pass into a collage of driving creativity. His room was festooned with maps of England, photos of the Lake District, pictures of Lord Byron and George Orwell, and coats of arms. On the board a palindrome like, "A man, a plan, a canal, panama!" or some chalk illustration he had drawn. Always a messy desk. Always. Stacks of essays-in-progress, forgotten memos from the office, and word games to be sent of to *Writing!* magazine. Stacks of books towered above table tops like model skyscrapers. In the back sat two coffee pots brewing for A. P. literature class. Somehow, the atmosphere of the room always made me think it was pleasantly raining outside—as if the room was among the halls of misty Oxford.

Mr. Prahl himself was amply predictable. As the artist he would be hunched over in a student's desk snatched from the front row, dark eyebrows crumpled above his sharp pointed nose like two fighting caterpillars as he delicately applied a dot of red paint on a lead miniature soldier. Or perhaps it was more common to see him in his Tartan plaid tie and short-sleeved shirt gingerly lettering a certificate of some kind with a calligraphy pen.

As the literary scholar he sat in the same desk, facing his students and reading *Beowulf* or *The Canterbury Tales* in a half-whispered tone. Often he would stop, mid-sentence, and elaborate on the use of caesura, or Middle English pronunciations.

As the musician he leaned forward in the desk humming along with Beethoven's *5th Symphony*. If his furry hands were not cupped around his ears as he listened, one hand pressed its fingers onto his forehead as the other hand tapped its fingers on the desk.

"Oh! Oh!" he stammered excitedly during one of our last listening sessions before I left for college. We were listening to Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. "Doesn't this remind you of C. S. Lewis?" he hurriedly blurted. "I can just picture him in his study . . . " he paused, fingers fluttering capriciously in front of him, "It's a bit like his theme music. It's so . . ."

"So crisp?" I quipped.

"No . . . "

"Stately?"

"Well, kind of . . ."

With his words tarrying in my memory, I peered into his classroom. He stood behind his old tan lectern. Another Prahl position. I knew instantly that it was study hall as I entered a jungle of barbarous pygmies, sitting on desks, playing checkers with a chess set, chatting like magpies, and chucking paper wads at one another. I realized my cynical attitude toward the little Nazis was largely from Mr. Prahl.

I crossed the threshold onto the slightly dingy red-brown carpet. He saw me. Smiling, we shook hands.

"How is it that you came moments before the bell sends these kids off to lunch?" he queried, truly amazed. We both knew the answer to his question.

"Providence," I smiled.

"Yeah," he replied knowingly.

"Hey. Hey," he alerted two students to their unnecessarily loud talk. They paid no attention. Actually, they probably didn't hear Mr. Prahl's quiet voice. "Hey, *children*," he warned. The two settled down long enough for Mr. Prahl to look back at me. Then they started gabbing again.

"Ah, dear," Mr. Prahl sighed. I smiled to myself. Nothing had changed.

"A bit rowdy, huh?" I began.

"They always are." I knew he was thinking *only ten years to retirement*.

"It's the day before break," I offered.

"Oh, yeah. It's always something." he said exasperatedly. He mimicked to me in a higher voice, "It's the day of the football game, It's the day after a football game. It's Friday. It's Monday. It's Wednesday. It's, it's always something." He shook his head, hand on his high forehead. "They say what ever they think. Whatever they want. No matter what it is. Any little thing. If they think it, it comes out of their mouths."

Like black bile, I thought to myself. "How old are they?" I interrupted Mr. Prahl.

"Ninth and tenth graders."

"*My* class, we did not act like this."

"No," he agreed. "It's just gotten so much worse."

"Sign of the times," I added. "Maybe you should be more . . . coachish." I declared and promptly told him about Coach Korver, the Northwestern football coach who would be exactly what these kids needed. "At worst, they'll hate you. But they'll respect you."

"I tried that once," he muttered forlornly as the bell rang, signaling Pavlov's dogs to blitz out the door. "It's not me. I can't teach that way."

And he can't. Mr. Prahl is too polite . . . too soft-spoken . . . too patient . . . and too self-critical to be harsh to anyóne.

Together we sat in the empty room. Gesturing with his hairy arms and hands, his tan bespectacled face lit up with enthusiasm as he told me of the soon to be released version of *Hamlet*, starring Mel Gibson. That turned my thoughts to Mr. Prahl's house, his voluminous audio and visual tape collection: old movies, radio dramas, classical music, and Broadway sound tracks.

With a look of indifference he told me of his latest attempt to publish his children stories. They had been rejected by another publisher. I had read the manuscripts. They were wonderfully clever stories he phenomenally illustrated. Was it too much to believe the publisher just assumed the unopened package on his desk contained bad stuff and never even opened it?

The bell rang. The wild herd approached. Mr. Prahl sat ponderously and I grimaced as the screaming chimps paraded disorderly to their seats.

"We need to get together," I declared to Mr. Prahl. "I have some things I want you to look at."

"Sure. When?"

"Saturday?"

"Uh, . . . ?" He was about to ask where, but there was only one place on both our minds.

"Midtown," I anticipated his question. The Midtown Cafe on the square was where we often went after school to play chess or talk. "I'll call you before and set a time," I said as I slowly backed out of the room.

He turned his attention to the uncouth students, "Children, children," he uttered.

"We are not children," one of the children answered back.

"Yes you are. You *are* children." stated Mr. Prahl. He would have liked to reason his statement out with them, but they would have never understood, never listened. They replied now with snickers.

The rain was coming down fiercely as I stepped into the Civic, the ostentatious cursing of some freshman in the hallway lingering in my ear.

Mr. Prahl was probably meant to live in 1590 among Shakespeare, Donne, and Bacon; not in 1990 amidst a whirl of Bart Simpsons.

In Unison

In the window of a beaten down house
near Harajuku,
an elderly man
proudly displays his wares—
—the joy of little girls everywhere.

Each is carefully crafted
by the master—
spending hours
to make a treasure—

while his wife tailors
kimono and obi.
She has an eye for
the patterns
and colors.

His dry wrinkled hands
tenderly
treat the porcelain faces—
their white, nearly translucent skin,
cherry-red lips,
and perfectly formed ebony eyebrows.

The dolls' characters
are displayed as prominently
as their kimono.
A child,
clad in blue and white yukata,
clutches an origami ball.
A woman,
primped in a red wedding kimono
where gold cranes are playing,
demurely
cradles a fan.

This line of dolls
smile
and frown
in a strange unison.

A solitary doll
(a result of the couple's travels long ago)
with golden tresses
instead of black
earns attention and awe
that she would gladly forego
in exchange
for the obsidian cap.

Brenda Renes

*note: A yukata is an informal summer kimono.

Half-n-Half

Hannah Gravatt

Joy dialed the long distance number for what seemed like the hundredth time that week, but the phone bill was the last thing on her mind. The hour-old words of her doctor were still fresh and running through her mind like a broken record . . ."You're going to need a kidney transplant as soon as possible. You should talk this over with your twin—and I'd like to see you two together within the week to run some tests . . ."

A familiar "Hello!" interrupted her failing attempt to put those incessant words into her own. Nothing came out.

"Joy?"

Joy saw herself and Chloe at fourteen lying on their double bed late at night in deep discussion, shivering over unimaginable hypothetic situations—"if you ever needed a kidney or something...you could even have half my heart— or at least a valve!"

The other would predictably joke, "Have a heart"

"Ha ha, really funny." But they laughed anyway and kept imagining . . . "What if we'd been siamese twins joined at the brain. Wonder if they could split it...Would we have half an I.Q.?

The voice on the phone interrupted again. "Joy? If you need it you can have it."

"The doctor wants to see us both this week," Joy said. "Can you come?"

They sat in the waiting room, a table of children's books between their chairs. They exclaimed at the same time.

"Dr. Seuss!"

"I haven't read this in years!"

They found themselves at either end of Green Eggs and Ham.

"Go ahead," said Joy.

"No, let's read it together—" So Chloe let go of her end and sat down by Joy. "—You read a page, I read a page."

When they were young they had always fought to read the same Little Golden Book at the same time, clawing at opposite dog-eared corners, until their mother came into the room threatening to take the book away if they did not share. When neither worked, she got out her big orange-handled scissors. The steel jaws ate their way up the golden binding, slicing the book in half. When Joy finished her half and Chloe finished hers, they had to make up to complete the story. This arrangement made them so happy they suggested cutting their pet rabbit in half. Fortunately, they learned to share before any blood spilled.

But it had been years since anything was cut in half.

"Joy Nelson?" A nurse armed with a clipboard stood at the doorway. "Good afternoon! . . . if you'll just wait in this room, the doctor will be right with you . . ."

Joy dangled her legs from the examination table while Chloe sat Indian style next to her. Every time footsteps sounded near their room, Chloe made a move to uncross her legs and move to the chair. She ripped the white paper-sheet once when she was sure it was finally him. Almost simultaneously, their hands landed on either side of the jagged tear and they pantomimed putting it back together, making jokes about forgetting to bring tape or needle and thread.

"Well, they can't re-use this one," said Joy.

"They always put a new one on anyway," Chloe added, "I know I wouldn't want to catch what you have!"

The doctor waltzed in, his white coat and frigid stethescope flapping. When Chloe hopped down he motioned for her to stay there. "This concerns you equally . . . Now, have you talked this over . . . there are still risks . . ."

But in their minds it was already as good as done.

Blind

Someone tries to say
just what shade of blue it is,
but only dark and light
take turns
on my eyelids
when clouds chase butterflies.

Hannah Gravatt

Speculation

The symmetry of angular shapes,
the coolness and stillness
and tilt of marble chills me
to the bone,
for I see here my place
among the tombstones,
my place as Mother,
Eve to my children.

My hand touches the broken
stone, my fingers slowly trace
the chiseled phonics
to a jagged edge,
to a maternal identity
forever fractured
by a missing letter.

With a stranger's grief,
I mourn the loss of that final
consonant, that single sound
which makes "Mother" whole.

Will my children
remember me so—
in fragments?

Ruth Koob

Spectrum

The large golden sun dips behind the
puffy white clouds
as the ocean-blue waves roll up
along the shore.
Colors of pink and plum
dance upon your face
as your chestnut eyes stare
into mine.
The white sand oozes between
our toes as we laugh
and walk.
You reach for my hand
and...
I awake with
colors of plum and pink
dancing upon my face.

Michele Koopmans

Love Stuff

What's this love stuff anyway—
This stuff that fills me day by day?

Is love the stuff that stuffs
and finally
when it's stuffed enough
It stuffs a little more stuff in
'Til

POP!

Your heart swells out
and then
There's room for more love stuff?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

But I'll tell you something this stuff's got.

It's got the power to cause a pain
(causing heart-swell pain again and again)
That races through your mind — your brain,
Courses fast through every vein
Drives you crazy, mad, insane
and makes you quite enjoy the strain
of making room for yet more stuff

That never really stuffs enough
Into a heart that's made to swell,
and there's no way to really tell

How much room is in the dwelling
Of One who causes love stuff's swelling?

Jena Dukes

The Bureau

I wanted to clean the bureau,
My daughter's clutter and antidotes
scattered about, clattering shiny and
metallic. The lipstick rolled on and on
in rose, red, and plum. 'Til it
hit the soft pink rouge and bumped
into hues—hues of eye-coloring even I
have never seen; purple, blue, brown, and
green. And mascaras, and eye-liners, and
face-concealing cremes.
And one clear bottle
to strip away these masks.

Kirsten Zenker

Mudbogging

Laura Verdoorn

"Ladies and Gentleman, welcome to the Osceola County Fair's first annual mudbogging contest!" a booming voice echos over the loudspeaker in the grandstand. Nearby in the First Reformed food stand a waitress leans against the door frame and rolls her eyes. "Mudbogging. What'll they think of next to fill those bleachers?"

As a throng of people storm the grandstand, the driver of a 1987 Dodge Ram pickup with balloon tires revs up his engine and prepares to slog through a 130-foot-long hole filled with oozy, gooey mud. (Men have worked all day to dig the hole and water it down to just the right consistency.) Teenage hoods, moonlighting businessmen, car/truck buffs, and volunteer paramedics stand sentinel-like on the dirt pile behind the hole, hollering encouragement at the mudboggers.

Bang! At the starting gun the pickup shoots forward like a cannon ball, and flying mud spatter-paints polka dots on the spectators. Mud also cakes the truck's underside, spins around the wheel hubs, and clogs the exhaust pipe. Barely half-way through the mud hole, the truck grinds to a halt. Playing to the crowd the driver revs the engine, spins his wheels, and contorts his face grotesquely.

The chill night air rings with shouts from the audience.

"Pack it in!"

"Call a tow truck!"

"Come on, Big Guy, back it up and try again!"

The driver flings open his mud-spattered door and leans out to see how deep he has sunk. It's no use; he has lost the battle of man against mud. Disgustedly he slams his door and sits back to wait for a tractor to pull him out with rope and pulley.

Guffawing and chattering, excited spectators pour from the stands after the first heat. The waitress braces herself for the onslaught of hamburger and Coke orders which will bombard her between mudbogging banter.

"Did you see that '75 Chevy? What a piece!"

"How'd he ever expect to get through the pit with that thing do you suppose?"

"Man did that mud fly—Ooooo-eeee!"

The waitress drums her fingernails on the top of the pop machine as she waits for the fizz in a cup to go down. "Mudbogging. Huh."

Back in the stands, farmers stand up and stretch, mothers jiggle their babies on their hips, and excited little kids clamber up to the top bleacher to lean out over the midway lights. The voice on the loudspeaker grabs their attention again: "Hey! Who can run through this big mud hole the fastest? Let's have five young ladies come down and give it a try! The lucky winner will get a ten dollar gift certificate from Steve's Val-U-Mart. Come on, girls, don't be shy! Here's your chance to be human mudboggers!"

Daring damsels bustle to the front of the stands and line up, each giving her opponents the evil eye as she removes her socks and shoes. "Are you ready? On your marks, get set, GO!" Looking like helpless midgets in a giant bowl of chocolate pudding, the girls slop and slip and slog their way toward the far end of the hole. Ooof! One unfortunate lass slips and falls face-first into the slop. Ugh! The red-head—or is it a brunette?—running behind her becomes chocolate-coated. The remaining competitors push forward, their legs making sucking noises as they push-pull, push-pull, push-pull in the mud.

The three girls are stumbling neck-and-neck when, suddenly, a tall, long-legged brunette takes the lead. She expends a final burst of energy and then falls, exhausted, over the finish line. As she rises from the mire, a delegate from Val-U-Mart places her prize between her muddy teeth, and she strides out to the food stand to treat herself to a Coke.

"What happened to you?!" interrogates the waitress, wrinkling her nose and cocking her eyebrows.

"I've been mudbogging!" the girl retorts with another muddy grin.

The waitress smirks and goes to get the Coke.

Suddenly a din erupts in the stands. Down at the starting line a buxom blonde is waiting beside a sassy, white, four-wheel-drive Ford. Waving to the crowd and winking at a chunky, bearded, man behind her in line, she opens the pick-up door and slides gracefully into the driver's seat.

At the instant the starting gun explodes, she puts her foot to the floor and vaults into the mud hole. The audience rises to their feet en masse and the excited little kids bound down to the bottom bleacher to stand and press their noses against the chain-link fence, unmindful of the shower of mud spewing in their direction. In one effortless burst of speed the white Ford, now mud-spattered, charges through the bog, never coughing, never sputtering, until it has sprung out onto level and solid ground. With a triumphant smile, the blonde rolls down her window and gives the thumbs-up sign to her adoring public while her boyfriend unhooks his mudbogged '89 GMC from the tow-tractor. He stands, shoulders hunched, shaking his head while hoots, hollers, and cat-calls reverberate throughout the fair grounds.

The waitress removes her money belt and goes to lean against the door frame again. Her eyes are drawn to the bugs flying around in the hot lights of the grandstand where an ostinato of riled-up crowd, souped-up engine, and pumped-up announcer punctuates the air. With a glance in either direction, she slips from the door and tiptoes a few feet to the wooden fence surrounding the grandstand. Shiftily, she scopes the area again and then leans down to peer through a hole in the grandstand fence.

It's in the Mail!

Brenda Renes

Two o'clock a.m. on the night before the twenty-page history paper's due date. Two adrenalin-filled college students begin to ponder the effects of pulling their hair out. "That would save me twenty minutes in washing, blow-drying, and curling tomorrow morning. I need all the time I can get. That's not even mentioning the money I'll save on gel and hair spray!" blurted out the blonde history major.

"Don't touch my hair. It's my best feature. I don't care what the stress level is in this room. My fingernails can go before my hair does," were the cries coming from beneath the auburn curls of the English major. In Fern Smith room 332 on term paper's eve, wittiness and stress abounds. Two cohorts (much to the chagrin of the near-sleeping occupant of the bed in the dark other half of the room) coin a new phrase: "procrastination pays." Proud of their ingenuity, they allow themselves a short laugh before they again take off running with their pencils and erasers.

I am this full-fledged procrastinator. My life as a student—and especially as a writer—is completely affected by this. To be a procrastinator, one must not only get a paper in late now and then. It is a lifestyle to be lived consistently and with pride. With all papers—from "Why I want to teach" to "Shakespeare and his world view." We procrastinators enjoy life to the fullest. We do not waste effort in undue haste or exertion. A procrastinator will start no paper before its time—its time being the day before it is due.

To be a procrastinator is not necessarily to be anti-conscientious. With time (and sometimes even without it) we can be very conscientious. Two important statements in a procrastinators' lexicon are "WHEN IS IT DUE?" (often to be followed by raucous laughter or weeping) and "Can I have an extension?" With these two phrases, a procrastinator can truly live.

There is a standard among the procrastinating community. It is important, yet subtle enough to be missed by sporadic procrastinators. True procrastinators NEVER ask for help in completing late projects. Unlike novice or amateur procrastinators, true procrastinators never violate this honor code. "I got myself into this mess; I'll get myself out of it." (If I don't I'll never be able to face my roommate again.)

Procrastinators should never live with organizers. These two breeds simply have different priorities. In this survival of the fittest, procrastinators will be content to live in piles while organizers will be meticulously, religiously, even sadistically clean. Procrastinators will enjoy—even relish—late night interruptions of their schedule. Organizers will resent their procrastinating cohabitants and adhere to their creedal schedules—set in stone.

Aren't papers life? Will there be papers in the afterlife? Don't organizers love life?

I'll tell you tomorrow.

Limerick

There was a young lover from Dover
Who found all his luck in the clover;
He'd rip off his clothes
And strike a stark pose,
And say, "C'mon, gals! Look me over!"

Ruth Koob

The Man Who Came Back for His Funeral

Cia Larvick

Edward and Lily had been together for more than forty-five years. They had lived a good life and had raised three children together. But now their children were all grown and had families of their own. So, the two lived quietly together as they watched each other grow older.

Edward had had heart problems and high blood pressure for some time, but he went to his doctor regularly, and it was kept under control for the most part. But on one of his visits to the doctor, he was told he needed to come back for more tests. This worried Edward and his wife, and they wondered what might be wrong.

When he went back to the doctor, he went through all sorts of tests. Then he went through more tests. After that, he was given the bad news: he had cancer. The enemy had set in and was slowly attacking his body.

Edward and his team of doctors worked to fight it. They hooked up a little box with tubes leading into his body that would pump chemotherapy throughout his system. The box hung at his side, in a case suspended there by a strap that ran diagonally across his chest and over his shoulder. When Edward's grandchildren came to visit, he pointed to the box he wore and asked, "How do you like my new camera?" He liked to joke. Even about his serious illness.

One of Edward's grandchildren asked him if he was going to get better. "Well, I don't know. I'm not sure," he told the child. The child thought a minute and then said, "When our cat got sick, she died. I miss her, Grandpa."

Edward knew what the child was getting at and laughed as he said, "You know, if I die—I won't really be dead. I'll still be alive. Then I'll go to heaven, where everything is perfect." The child seemed comforted with this thought.

The chemotherapy made Edward very sick, so he frequently would tell his wife, "Well, I'll be in the office if you need me." But she knew that he would really be in the bathroom, bent over the toilet.

Edward took lots of little pills for his heart condition and some to ease the pain that the cancer caused him. His daily dose of pills were kept in a little, blue box. He took them at meals. When his granddaughter came to visit and stayed for lunch one day, he asked her, "Would you like some of my candy?" before he took his pills.

"No," she told him with a smile. She appreciated his good humor. "No, Grandpa. You need your candy. But thanks for offering."

As the days passed, Edward grew sicker and sicker. His doctors told him that the chemotherapy was doing no good and that the cancer was continuing to spread. Then they told him that he had no more than six months to live. Edward and Lily were greatly saddened by this, but they were God-loving people and knew in their hearts that if he died, that it was all going according to God's plan. His time here on earth would expire.

So, Edward was taken off of the ineffective chemotherapy and was given stronger pills for his pain.

Lily took care of him lovingly. She tried to make him as comfortable as possible. She made him special meals of soft, easily digestible foods in hopes that he would spend less time in "the office" after eating.

Eventually, Edward could eat nothing but baby food. So, his wife bought jars of baby food for him and continued to look after him as lovingly as she could. He was too weak to even bathe himself anymore, but she did it for him. She did as much as she could to help him, and their love continued to grow.

Edward kept his sense of humor right up until the end. He had always been a joker, and he still joked about his certain death. It made it easier for him and his wife.

Edward and Lily talked about the funeral and made some arrangements, so that she would not have to do all of it later. One thing he asked was that his son-in-law, Lenny, do his eulogy. He thought a lot of his son-in-law and respected him a great deal. "If Lenny agrees to do the eulogy," Edward joked with Lily, "I'll be so happy—I might even come back for my funeral."

Soon after telling his wife this, Edward's condition greatly worsened, and he was hospitalized for what were to be the last few days of his life. He experienced much pain and drifted in and out of conscious thought. He could no longer recognize most people that he knew, nor could he speak very well, but he managed to whisper, "I love you," to his wife. These were the last words he said.

On the day of Edward's funeral, his family and friends gathered together to pay him their last respects. It was a sad day for them, but the sun shone brightly as a jewel under a clear, blue sky.

As Edward had requested, Lenny was to do the eulogy. All of Edward's family and friends stood quietly, with slightly bowed heads, while Lenny began the eulogy. As they listened to Lenny tell of Edward and the good life he had led, nobody noticed the man who walked across the cemetery and towards where they all stood with sad faces. The man continued to approach the group, while glancing at his watch.

Three of Edward's grandsons stood in a row, close to tears, but courageously holding them back. The man moved into the group to stand by the three teen-agers. "Sorry I'm late, boys," he said to them. "I hope I haven't missed too much."

The three boys didn't respond, but continued to look downward, thinking of how much they would miss their grandfather.

Edward's son, Jim, stood quietly beside his sister, Marie. Marie was crying and Jim held her hand. The man left the three boys and moved to Jim's side. He put a hand on Jim's shoulder and said, "Jim, I'm proud of you. Sometimes you had me worried, but I don't worry anymore. I'm just so proud of you."

The man then moved to Marie's side. "Marie," he said to her, "You were my first. You're my little girl. I love you."

Jim and Marie didn't seem to notice the man and continued to stand, holding hands, with downcast eyes.

The man slowly made his way throughout the group, speaking briefly to most everyone. But they all stood unmoved, unhearing.

The funeral ended and the group thinned out, leaving only Edward's immediate family members. The man was still there, too. He approached Lily, who stood with tears welling up in her eyes. He reached out and took her hand, while she stared in the direction of the casket. "Oh, don't cry, Lily," he said to her. "Here, maybe I have a hanky."

The man dug into his pocket, searching for a hanky, but instead pulled out a little, blue pillbox. He looked at it a moment and then attempted to put it back in his pocket. He didn't notice it fall to the ground.

A tear rolled down Lily's cheek. "Please don't be sad, Lily," the man said. As he bent to kiss her cheek, a gentle breeze dried the tear, and she smiled. Lily's daughter, Marie, saw her slow smile and asked, "What are you thinking about, Mom?"

"Oh," Lily answered, "I was just remembering when your father told me that if Lenny did the eulogy, that he'd come back for his funeral." Lily had a distant look in her eyes, as if remembering earlier days.

"We'll all miss him, Mom," Marie said to her. "I'm going to talk to Lenny a minute. Will you be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay," Lily sighed. "Go talk to Lenny. I'll wait here."

So, Marie left her mother's side, not even taking notice of the man who held her mother's hand. He let it go to look at his watch. "Oh—I have to be going. I wouldn't leave so soon, but I have an appointment," he explained.

At Nine

At nine, your closet was a dark, eerie cave,
Entrapping us in a jungle of plaids;
Losing us in an endless maze,
Confining us to lightless nights and days.

At nine, your scary ghost stories were real,
And I was frightened to sleep at night.
But I never had those terrible dreams
That you said could sneak up sometimes.

They told me a tractor crushed out your life.
But that could not possibly be—
We planned to play games all that night,
So my parents must have lied to me.

A different boy was in your casket;
His lips were waxy, swollen, and blue.
You must have hidden somewhere fantastic,
Because this boy definitely wasn't you.

I recognized your freckles, rooster-tail—
All else physical, I knew not.
You would never look so pale—so frail.
Why does everyone look so distraught?

After he was laid to rest,
I waited for you to come back—
I even sat in the loft by the nest
Where we met if we lost track.

Days and nights have come and gone.
I would not, could not, believe them then.
But my memories have grown much stronger
And I want to understand when I reach ten.

Tricia Abrahamson

The Sale

A basket held her things:
some clothes, a frame and rings.
From this it couldn't be told
why on Earth she'd hold
these things that did not seem
worthy to redeem.
But no one seemed to care.
The owner wouldn't be there.

Rachel Van Kalsbeek

Words Between Words

Rachel Searcy

Across from my big yellow house in our tiny Quaker town of Whittier, Iowa, (unincorporated area, population 175, according to the highway signs) stood a petite white box house which belonged to Edith Knight. Edith was 82 years old (ten times my age plus two years, according to my math teacher) and was hump backed, thin, and spry with a creamy smile and warm chuckle that would melt even the sternest faces. She was the local news writer for the "Whittier News" column in the Springville paper (Springville was a town of 2000 nearby) and was forever peeking out of her big picture window to see if guests were visiting our home or if we had gone on an "expedition," as she often named it in the paper. Being a lover of writing and words, Edith's favorite pastime was a heated game of Scrabble, and as a young eager learner daily marvelling at the discovery of a vast ocean of words I had no idea even existed, I was a more than willing partner.

On sweltering summer days I'd march barefoot across the street and bang on her door with the excited energy of an idealistic soldier prepared for battle. She'd always smile, that smile that exposed a lightning-like array of kind wrinkles on her withered face, give me a quick hug, and head to the closet as fast as her bent over body could take her. Then she'd pull out the faded box, its white corners ripped and fuzzied with years, and we'd slide off the lid and take out the contents once again. That box had a story all its own, the once shiny white fresh-painted letters now grayed from eternal opening, closing, putting back, and taking out again.

Edith and I would play Scrabble for hours on end. She'd lay horizontal words with high score letters like "expedition" using the 10 point "x" while I'd palm my brow heavily and lay a simple "friend" vertically using her "e" to build on after what seemed like ten minutes of brain busting thinking. I'd try and try to drum up words as big and long as hers from my limited vocabulary. Often during these agonizing minutes, Edith would go to the kitchen to get some milk and homemade cookies and then tell me a story from her younger years, my favorite being the one about Jake, a little elderly man she used to jest at as he walked by her house every day. "He was on his way to the Joe's Market," she'd say, "and he would talk to himself about crazy things like the price of beans in China, how much it costs to hang up your coat in Greece, and why toothpaste gets on your clothes if you're not careful." Straightening her shiny white cloud of hair with a crooked finger, she'd often then talk about Joe's Market burning down, or about when Carol, her neighbor and best friend of fifteen years moved, and the day Jake just bent over and died right in front of her house. All the while, her croaky voice was calm and monotone, like the steady hum of our old refrigerator. I didn't like that sound much. It kept me awake at night and sometimes scared me.

You'd think the constant chatter during our games would have interrupted my thinking, but it sometimes gave me a word if I listened closely and held on to everything said that was two or more syllables. Once I came up with the long, hard word "lingered" from one of her stories. I asked her how to spell it and found I had all the letters to lay it! Nevertheless, Edith always won. As she talked about the tiny river town of Bay Creek, Ohio, the town similar to Whittier where she grew up, and the Scrabble battles she also fought and lost to a word-filled grandma, she found even bigger, better words than I. I think she often felt sorry for me though, so she'd wait to lay the 50-point "double-word score" word like "accepting" until shortly before the game was to end.

I suppose these Scrabble losses could have been a letdown for a young aspiring journalist, but I loved just listening to Edith as much as I loved playing Scrabble with her. It was okay that she always won. I triumphed with her in inward exhilaration that one so old and withered could still think so clearly and have her competitive drive. Nearing the end of her life, yet hanging on to each day, it was as if she were trying to prove her worth to a doubtful world and I was more than happy to stand beside her in this momentous effort. Her distant stare and monotone murmurs about Old Joe's Market, Carol moving, and the Scrabble she'd played with her grandma when she was growing up intrigued and disturbed me alike, however. They seemed to indicate a passive acceptance of her life's changes that made no sense to me. To me each day was like the next.

Dad came into my room one day about two weeks after my last Scrabble game with Edith and told me she was very sick. "Edith has cancer" he said, "and she's probably going to die in a few weeks or months." I sat frozen, unable to respond. No more Scrabble, no more stories, no more milk and cookies. Words from stories banged through my mind. "Change," she'd passively said the last time we played the game together, "Life will always involve change." "NO!" I screamed inside after Dad left, "I don't want things to change!"

During the month that Edith lay sick in her home before she died, I didn't visit her even once. "We're going to see Edith," Dad would call before each weekly jaunt, "Wanna come this time Rach?" "No," I'd respond quietly, envisioning her once mobile body lying still and motionless, her pearly white cumulus cloud of hair now a few wispy stratus strings, and her cracky voice croaking out babyish one-syllable words. They had said she didn't do or say much of anything now and that she didn't recognize anyone. No more learning big words, no more glorying in her excited hobbles to the old oak cabinet to get the game, no more stories. No, I would not go!

Her made-up body lay in the casket that sultry August day, her red lips bent into a peaceful smile that seemed to say it was okay. Words— expedition, friend, Bay Creek, lingered, move, change, and Jake–echoed through my mind in tangled Scrabble letters as if trying desperately to fit together.

A postman and his wife, the Lams, soon moved into Edith's white box house and painted it a dirty yellow. They put up a privacy fence and built an ugly dog kennel

where the healthy field of grass I often played in used to be. I could still see Edith watching from the big picture window that linked her to the outside world, and waving a lively vein-streaked hand.

I had a dream one night many years after the funeral. In the dream, when I bent over the casket to peer at Edith's powdered white face, she popped out at me with a blaze of fiery red hair extending in all directions and screamed, "BLAAAH!!" I instantly awoke from a combination of her scream and my own and sat straight up on the bed, hot beads of sweat streaming down my face as words—expedition, lingered, friend, Jake, and Bay Creek chased through my mind again. Why was she angry at me? Why was she trying to scare me? There was something she desperately wanted me to know, something from the words perhaps, that I just couldn't understand.

Fearfully, I got out of bed and stared at the yellow box house through my window, remembering the feeling of the hot black asphalt on my feet as I'd skipped across the street to Edith's house so many years ago. Since that time, the road had been torn up and replaced by a wide gray highway with broken yellow lines on either side for bikers, the big maple in front of her house had died along with the maple on the corner, and Mr. Klemmer and his family from kitty corner across the road had moved. Every time I had gone away and come back, whether from summer camps, college, or my missionary trip to Hong Kong, another neighbor had died, family had moved in or out, or a new house built, and I had felt sick inside again.

Suddenly Edith's face peeked through the picture window, her sparkling eyes alive with inquiry as she strained to see if anything newsworthy was happening at my house. Then her bony hand was beckoning me to join her in a Scrabble match and we were together at the board exuberantly filling the room with multitudes of words spoken and played. I looked away, wanting to forget, and focused on the highway's broken yellow lines in front of her house instead. A scraggly dog chased a tiny white kitten across the road and I turned my head in its direction, focusing my eyes on the road again, for they were quickly gone. The gleam of distant yellow caught my eye and I followed the gray highway until the yellow lines meshed with the darkness of the night. In my years of growing up, I had learned that the road was more than just the rock strip linking my house to Edith's...And although it had changed to gray, it continued to extend beyond my town in both directions, bringing people in and taking people out. Looking back to Edith's window, I envisioned her smiling, weathered face as she laid the 50-point "accepting." All at once, the words connected and I understood everything.

Grandma's Watch

Yesterday your delicate, golden
watch on my healthy arm
stopped dead-
The immortal hands gave up the
steady ticking that kept
your heart tenderly pulsating
in mine, and I flung myself
into your stiff arms
and wept.

But today I saw through tears
that life and love are
not material-
Your round face and golden
smile encircle my heart
with German jokes and
rhythmic laughter to lift
my every timely
step—

Tomorrow I look forward to
uniting again
where time won't stop and
I can laugh with you
in golden streets
forever . . .

Rachel Searcy

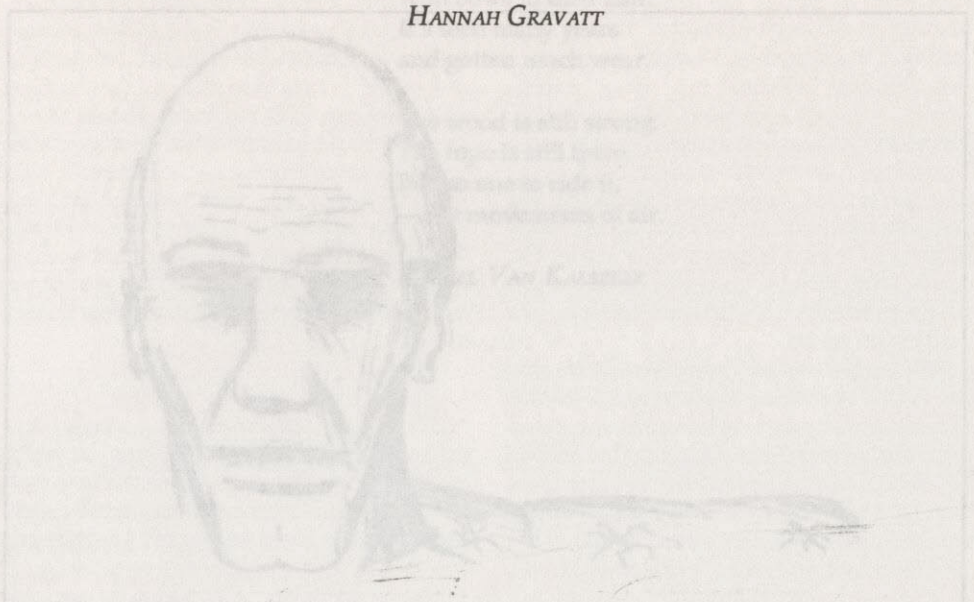
Medals

Generations of Malones placed
on a green October hillside.
Like medals on a navy coat,
sparkling hard at Pa's graveside.

Beekeeper, rough-handed sailor
was father, grandfather and friend.
They hear his nightwatchman whistling
tho' cancerous body now boxed in.

She set a rose on his casket
like a glass of tea on his chair.
In death, devotion perfected
For Pa and his gal with gray hair.

Hannah Gravatt



Uncle Bill

Laura Verdoorn

"Do you like living here, Uncle Bill?" I asked once as we sat and visited in his room in the nursing home.

"Yah, sure, it's all right," he answered, the words rumbling in his throat because of his Dutch brogue. "I just have to go down the hall for meals, visiting, even Sunday service. They have it on a big television and it's just like sitting in church."

I was glad he was so content. I looked around his room: hospital bed, dresser, end table, two straight back chairs, big orange arm chair, sink, TV, and a couple of Christmas decorations that stay up all year round. Everything he owns is in that room.

Out in the hall there are rabbits stenciled on the wallpaper. I suppose they're there to make the place seem more like home. But the rabbits don't hide the empty wheel chairs. Nor do they cover the stale smell of medicine and uneaten food. Invalids lie silently in their beds while other senior citizens peek shyly from behind their doors or shuffle down the hall. I feel trapped in the nursing home, but Uncle Bill doesn't.

Uncle Bill looks at Amy and me, two of his great nieces, and blinks. His eyes are magnified by the thick lenses in his wire-rimmed glasses. He reminds me of a bullfrog sitting on a lily pad. I expect his tongue to dart out any minute to catch a fly going by, but instead, his whole upper plate moves forward.

When he'd first seen us that evening he had grinned, those same yellow teeth appearing in his thin, age-spotted face. He was happy to have company, but I wasn't sure he knew who we were. When shuffling through the papers on his bedside table we ran across one that outlined my Grandma Alice's family: "Alice (Bill's sister) married Ray Juffer. Their oldest daughter, Alfreda, married Larry Verdoorn." And there we were: "2 girls—Laura and Amy."

When we had visited two weeks earlier, Uncle Bill had been confused about our family ties. "Who's that, now?" he asked, pointing to me.

"That's Laura, Alfreda's daughter," my mom's sister enunciated loudly; she always feels a great need to compensate for Uncle Bill's hearing loss.

"Is there another one?" Uncle Bill interjected before my aunt had time to explain further.

"Yes—Amy," I answered motioning toward my sister.

"Who was Alfreda's mother?" Uncle Bill questioned, still confused.

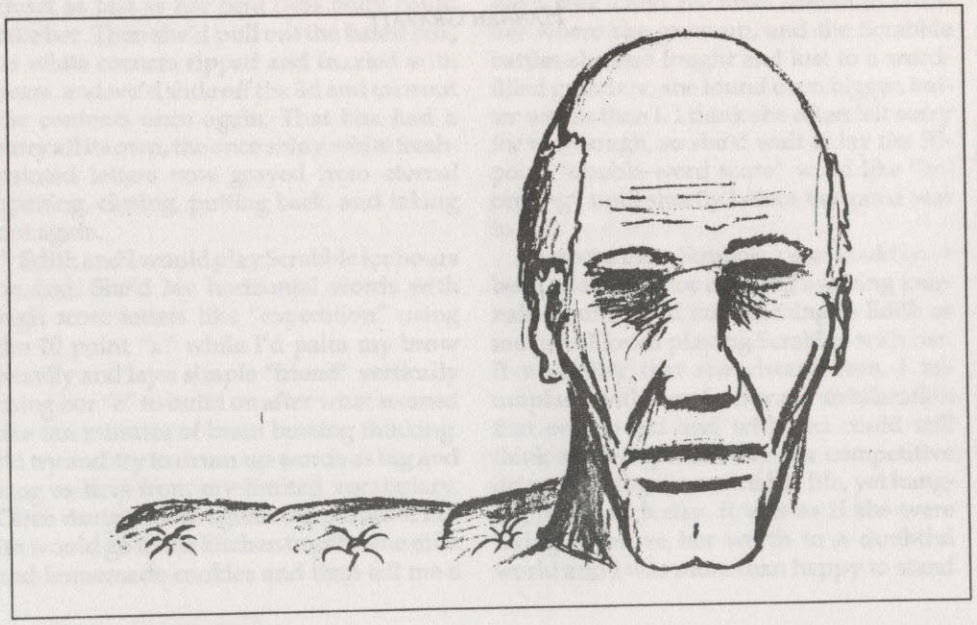
"Alice, married to Ray Juffer," Mom explained.

Uncle Bill shook his head in vague understanding and then looked at me. "So you're the daughter of Alice's daughter?"

"Right, Uncle Bill. You're exactly right."

"We brought you some more cookies, Uncle Bill," Amy informs him. He grins again. Uncle Bill likes to keep his cache of cookies well-stocked because he has to eat six times per day. "When I had the cancer my stomach was operated on and they took part of it away," Uncle Bill tells us seriously. "Now I can't eat so much 'cause my stomach's smaller." He also claims that the medicine he takes coats a hole in his stomach that won't heal. It keeps the food from going out and also prevents him from "bleeding to death."

The medicine hasn't helped him gain weight, however. His familiar plaid flannel shirts and polyester pants always hang loosely on his thin form. His youngest sister, my eccentric Aunt Jeannette from California, has offered to get him some new slacks and warm shirts, but we always tell her not to. Uncle Bill always stuffs the new clothes in the back of his drawers and wears the old, anyway.



My first memory of Uncle Bill is of him living with his younger sister, my Aunt Ethel. He lived with her because he'd never married. I suppose that's one reason he is the way he is: stubborn, crusty, proud, and yet amusing.

I also remember him playing pool.

"Did you always play pool, Uncle Bill?"

No, he'd started that, among other things, after he quit farming: "'So, you're gonna quit farming,' Jake Cool says. 'You wanna help me on the golf course?'"

Uncle Bill had willingly consented "just for the dickens of it." He must have started playing pool about then, too. "I was really good—one of the best ones," Uncle Bill boasted, surprising us. "Oopus Feekes was

good, but I beat him a couple of times. I had a good reputation."

I was glad to see him so pleased. He smiled and rocked back and forth on his bed, one hand on each knobby knee. His black shoes, which look three sizes too large, rocked back and forth on the floor, too.

"Are you going to have a birthday party this year, Uncle Bill?" I queried, trying to keep conversation going. I was careful, however, not to ask his age. It's a well-known fact in our family that Uncle Bill thinks he's a year younger than he actually is. Once we even wrote out the whole string of dates from December 7, 1902 to the present to try to convince him, but he still swears he was zero in 1903, not one. Maybe he has a point: he *was* zero until the last month of 1903.

"Do you remember Pearl Harbor?" I asked curiously, expecting it to be a big deal because it happened on his birthday.

He thought about it and scratched his head. "Wasn't that when Hitler... was... Ahhh... When was it?"

"1941."

"Oh, yah, I remember all that stuff."

Uncle Bill lost a brother in the 40s, too. He drowned after passing out in a puddle on a Dutch island in the Pacific. "He was in the Navy and they were protecting it; it was his job." Uncle Bill stated matter-of-factly. "It was when Hitler was at war or something." Time has healed any pain Uncle Bill may have felt; I'm not so sure he has *ever* felt pain of the emotional kind.

He shows the same crustiness when speaking of his brother Arie who died at age twelve. "At that time years ago, the flu was going around. We all had it, but Arie told Ma he wasn't going to make it; he knew he was going to die."

"Did that make you sad when he died?" I questioned imagining how terrible I would have felt had it been my sister.

"My dad? Yah, I remember when he died." Amy and I exchanged sad, bemused glances as we realized the tricks poor hearing can play.

Uncle Bill's hands moved restlessly in his lap. They are big and blue-veined, and look like they belong on a larger body. But they are his—farmer's hands.

I wasn't born yet when Uncle Bill was a farmer, but he claims it was "just what he liked." He rented from his dad (my great grandpa, Tjerk) and when his dad passed away, he rented from his mom. In the early days he used horses to farm the land.

"What were their names, Uncle Bill?" Amy asked, always concerned about the "important things."

Uncle Bill looked at her blankly and blinked. He put his hand up to smooth down his oily, slate-gray hair that he always combs straight back from his forehead. "Ah, I don't know . . . Dick . . . Bill . . ."

"We had $12,500 against the farm," Uncle Bill was off again. "That wasn't so much, but then came the Depression—when everything went broke, you know. The prices dropped out of everything. I says to Ma, 'Let's let the farm go, but let's not rent from the government. We'll have to pay so much for rent and then the upkeep of the buildings will go down. We have to keep the buildings from going to the dogs." Obviously this was something that had touched his life more than Hitler's war ever did.

Later I brought up the farm again. I wasn't sure if Uncle Bill had let it go, or not.

"*Did* you rent from the government, Uncle Bill?"

"Yah, we let the farm go 'cause we have to pay interest on the debt that we owe. I says, 'We won't have money to pay for the upkeep of the buildings, so we better let the farm go.' They didn't put me off the farm; they let me rent. That was good of the government."

I nodded. I don't think I've ever heard anyone make that comment, despite our affluence. Uncle Bill's wide, watery eyes had seen tough times and his large, gnarled hands had known hard work. He knew what it was like to have to do without and to be satisfied with the simple. Maybe that's why he is able to sit in his small room each day without wishing there were more to life.

His Hands

Result of time-
wrinkled.
Result of labor-
roughened.

Blue twisted roads are
wound around and over bone,
used over the years
to build and twist
a life long map.

They spoke of kindness
so easily given.
They spoke of experience
not easily earned.

Strong, but dextrous
tapered and kind—
wise in years.

Result of time—
knowledge.
Result of labor—
usefulness.

Wendy Muller

The Old Swing Sits Still

The old swing sits still.
No motion it sees.
It just sits all day
-looking at trees.

Remembering girls
with bows in their hair.
It's seen many years
and gotten much wear.

The wood is still strong.
The rope is still there.
But no one to ride it,
—just movements of air.

Rachel Van Kalsbeek

The Little Flame From Heaven

Tricia Abrahamson

The folks in those parts found it rather amusing when they heard of the town named Ware. The men, and some women too, would spat out their chew, wipe the juicy remnants from dry lips with the backs of dirt-cracked hands, and raspily growl, "Where in the hell is Ware?" Then they'd slap their knee as if telling the townspeople a new joke. The pun grew old after a time but amusement was rare in Ware, Iowa and people did the best they could to survive.

Everyone seemed to be related to everyone else in that town or else they all just coincidentally looked alike. Outsiders liked to harass and say that all of Ware stepped off the same boat from the Old Country. It was true that many folks had an accent that they kept trying to hide, and that made some people a bit suspicious. Truthfully, many probably were not legal citizens of the United States. But they kept mostly to themselves and had an honest occupation of farming. One ambitious family opened up the Anderson General Store. They could have done fairly well for themselves had they extended the line of credit. Folks were mighty angry, and when the Depression hit and all, the Andersons had to close down for good. They took their debts with them and headed for Missouri.

In 1943, the empty general store became a secret meeting place for the six county members of the Ku Klux Klan. Their weekly gatherings were the talk of the town for about a month. Then a couple of the Hartmann boys got up the nerve to go take a daring peek at the club's night rituals. They came from the meeting a bit disappointed. Apparently, the members just sat around the pot belly stove smoking cigars and betting away their Sunday offering. Half the Klan didn't even have white hoods or cloaks—probably for fear that their wives would skin them alive for taking clean linen sheets. There weren't any black folks around to threaten. Ware did have an old Jewish couple, but they owned the largest apple orchard in the county and on occasion would be very generous with their surplus produce, so the KKK decided they liked apple pie far too much to give them any grief. Thus, life was pretty quiet all around.

Then something exciting happened. Old Mattie Cooper's empty, rotted tool shed burned clear to the ground. The cause was unknown. Folks claimed that after church one Sunday Mattie said his shed was nothing but a pigeon-manure collector and he'd destroy the blasted thing himself if the grass around it wasn't so dry. Everyone accused Mattie of starting the fire. They claimed that he was being his old, lazy, forgetful self and probably snuck away from his chores with a lantern to take a nap. Then he must have left the lantern in the shed and a huge rat tipped it over, thus starting a fire in the old straw and oily rags. All sorts of tales began transpiring until Frannie, his vocal wife, became his valid alibi. She insisted that he was in town doing yard work for the Ware School at the time of the fire. No one ever argued with Frannie—not even Mattie. But now folks were curious as to why the Coopers needed the extra money. People just never suspected that Frannie might be expecting a young one in a few months. She just wasn't considered the loving motherly type and Mattie couldn't be seen as the responsible father of anything.

So the mystery continued for several months and two more fires occurred within the same ten-mile radius. Each time, a worthless building was destroyed and no valuable property was harmed. Folks began calling this arsonist "The Flame From Heaven."

Even though it was assumed that nothing or no one was experiencing any danger, the townspeople still came to watch the buildings turn to ashes. Families stood around, hand in hand, as to not let the young ones wander too closely to the burning embers. One such family was headed by Cless and Martha Dexter. With their four children, Chet, Roy, Maud, and Jimmy, they stood in quiet harmony, fixed upon the rising smoke and yellow-orange flames. Eventually, Martha had to tell little Jimmy to stop fidgeting—but he was full of inquisitive questions.

"Look at all that smoke!" he began. "Are the Hansons sad that their shed's burning down?" he asked sincerely.

His mother answered, "Well, no, not really. It was a building they didn't use anyway. But if the fire had gotten to any other buildings, then it could have been very sad for them."

"Oh, I see," he dreamily whispered, squeezing his mother's hand tightly.

Moments later he wanted to know, "Is 'The Flame from Heaven' good or bad?"

"In some ways good, I think," was her reply.

"So do I," thought Jimmy.

Then the Dexter family, along with the other onlookers, dispersed when there was nothing more to be done or seen.

To honor their invisible guest, Ware decided to celebrate the largest Fourth of July in fifty years. In past decades, this holiday merely consisted of two drunkards in their long-johns who ran down main street holding a fizzed-out whisky bottle in one hand and a burnt-out sparkler in the other. The townspeople would stand on their porches and shake their heads in disapproval. But each year they watched, then turned to their neighbors nodding a silent good evening, and retreated inside as if their slippered feet could not carry them beyond the front steps.

After the Fourth of July, the summer only got better. All of a sudden everyone seemed to be needing a new barn. No one scheduled anything on Saturdays because there was a strange understood assurance that a neighbor would be calling for all the extra hands he could find. Before the womenfolk even knew where they'd be going, the fragrance of fresh-baked pies, bread, and dumplings filled the streets and fields of Ware. The hard-working men awoke extra early to complete their chores and sharpen their tools. The lazy men awoke just a few moments early to wander off and secretly check their stills—they filled cider jugs with corn whisky, moonshine, and other homegrown concoctions. Never lifting a finger to work, these men claimed to be the barn-raisers' moral support. Eventually, these lazy men sold their stills and took to playing instruments. Shaven, bathed, and dressed

in alike trousers, shirts, and suspenders, they blended harmonicas, banjos, fiddles, and stringed guitars wonderfully to lead the most festive square dances in the county. People wondered why they never recognized these men before. Some said they just crawled out of the alleys one day from underneath the garbage, and others said they must have been set on fire by "The Flame From Heaven."

There hadn't been a fire for some time and Ware began quieting down a bit. Winter's frozenness seemed to affect everyone's attitude—children's snowmen were nowhere in sight, sleigh bells were gathering dust in solid barns, and naked trees lined the empty streets.

Just a week before Christmas, little Jimmy Dexter, praying for a way to give gifts to his family, overheard his mother's one wish. She had specifically said, "I wish that old chicken coop would burn down." He hurried on his rubber overboots and one-buttoned wool coat. His hands began to numb with coldness as he lit several wooden matches over the old chicken-manured straw. He blocked the piercing winter wind with his eleven year-old frame as best he could, but the matches kept blowing out. He tried remembering what he had done when old man Johnson's lean-to wouldn't burn. Within strides, he was back at the coop with a canful of gasoline from his father's Allison tractor. He knew this would work as it had before. The big smoky "poof" always excited him and kept him craving more. Then Jimmy rushed out of the engulfment just moments before the worthless building collapsed. He wasn't quite fast enough this time. His stocky mother grabbed him by the collar and looked at him with cold, threatening eyes. After a moment, she recalled her wish to have the coop burn down—then she also remembered the other mysterious fires. Her anger turned to questioning and puzzlement. But soon everyone would come. She prepared eagerly for her guests. Sleigh bells were heard in the distance and Jimmy stood by his mother's side greeting everyone with a happy smile. Cider and hot chocolate warmed the already warmed bodies and hearts, and carollers sang joyful Christmas hymns.

For years to come, Jimmy was kept at his mother's heels. People started wondering about this sudden attention that he was getting. Then they convinced themselves that Jimmy's mother did sort of neglect him more than the rest of her children. After that, "The Little Flame From Heaven" stayed away for a long while—until folks got tired of waiting. So they started burning down their own old buildings, never telling a soul who really did it. That's probably what kept Ware alive and going.

People of the World

People of the world,
What do you think?
World policies
Job opportunities
Inflation percentages
Hijacked planes
People of the world,
Who are you?
All races
"We" call foreign
Some live in the city
Others in the country
People of the world,
What do you hear?

Harsh cacophony attacking the senses
Refreshing nature noises resting souls
Fulfilled joyous noises of friends
Silent sounds of empty nobodyness

People of the world,
What do you see?

Bright, changing vibrant colors
Dull, fading dreary hues
Young, cheery optimistic faces
Old, pinched pessimistic onlookers

People of the world,
What do you feel?
Everything!
Breath-life
Gasp-death
Health
Sickness
Food-satisfaction
Hunger-starvation
People of the world,
What do you know?
Broad, strong long roads
Narrow, bumpy short journeys
Calm weather
troubled seas
People of the world,
Where did you begin?
God. A worthy, Divine, loving Creator.
Bang. An accident, survival, human evolution.

People of the world,
Where will you end?
Heavenly haven of happiness!
Horrible happenstance in Hell!

Sarah Walton

At the Car Wash

Wendy Muller

It was the kind that you have to hold the nozzle to regulate the amount of pressure. Personally, I think the nozzle resembles a black snake lying in wait for its next victim. Fumbling around the bottom of my purse for loose change, I realized the snake only took quarters.

Mumbling to myself, I found a dollar for the change machine. The change machine decided to be difficult and I found myself wrestling (with as much dignity as I could muster under the circumstances) to get my four quarters out. Out of the corner of my vision, I saw a wrinkled, work-roughened, age-mapped hand reaching to help me. "Here now missy, you have to turn the handle this way and then back this way." The hand made it look so easy.

I turned around to see the voice attached to the aged hand. I encountered a semi-tall elderly man wearing a black and red plaid flannel, black pants and worn work boots. I especially noticed his boots. They looked like old friends of the man. They had a layer of grime on them and were cracked in places from use. Then, I noticed his eyes. They had a twinkle or a spark of life in them. Those eyes had witnessed first-hand joy and pain of eighty years or so.

I thanked him for helping and turned to go back to my car thinking to myself that I had wasted about enough time on this car-washing business. "Car's a little dirty, missy."

Oh man, he's still around I thought. I wondered what he wanted. "Yeah, It is a little dirty." Even talking to him was hard for me because in the city, you don't talk to strangers—period.

I watched him walk over to a corner of the car wash and hunker down. I wondered if he used to be a farmer by the way he stood—casual yet alert. "Do you know anything about cars, missy?"

"Not a whole lot. I just get in and pray that it works. If it doesn't, I call a mechanic." I could sense he was getting ready to laugh by the twinkling in those eyes, as if I fit the typical image he had of a younger girl, and in spite of myself, I felt myself relaxing and ready to laugh along.

He began to explain that he used to be an auto mechanic until his hands became too stiff and he couldn't work as fast as he used to. He began giving me little tips about my car so I wouldn't have to pray as hard that it would start. He told me about things like oil, windshield washer fluid, and transmission fluid, with an almost child-like excitement. I stood transfixed, really paying attention to him. Here was a mystery to me and it was being solved!

We talked for awhile about where I was going to school, where I was from, what he was doing, and what retirement was like. Eventually, we had to go our separate ways. As I got back into my now clean car, I realized that I was no longer afraid of the snake. It was only a hose anyway and I had this warm glowing feeling in my stomach. I felt that somehow I had helped him. In my insignificant way, I had made a difference.

I felt I knew how easy it is to over-look people who desperately need someone to talk to and about how much satisfaction you can receive (yes, receive) by caring enough to listen. The rewards are immeasurable. I gained knowledge, a sympathetic feeling, and the understanding of a retired man needing to talk to someone. I will never forget the twinkle in his eyes as he told me about the car I take very much for granted and taught me how to conquer the snake.

My Grandfather

Shaking hands
 once so strong, so sure
Now too weak...

Hands which years ago
 cut my food now quiver
When picking up your own fork.

Hands which once picked me up
 are now too unsure
  to write out a check,
And now
 my birthday cards
  are typed.

Joy Suzanne Sterner

The Remote-Controlled Man

(dedicated to my father)

Nancy Heilman

The retirement-age farmer loved his remote control. His pattern was to enter the living room, scan it for the remote control, locate the device, strike the red POWER button, wait for a picture to fill the screen, then flip back and forth between channels as if he were unsatisfied.

Mostly, he used the gadget to assist him in watching either the noonday or evening news. He would flip from Channel 11 to Channel 9 to Channel 13 to Channel 5 and back to Channel 11—all in less than 15 seconds. In passing, he would catch, "Tonight, KSFY News traveled—and were convicted on criminal charges—is not clear to farmers how—but the state disagreed, citing—addition to high winds and blowing snow."

His wife and three children never understood how he made sense of the bits of words, phrases, and stories. But it was not for them to question him. For when he had the remote control in his calloused hands, he was in complete control. He had the POWER.

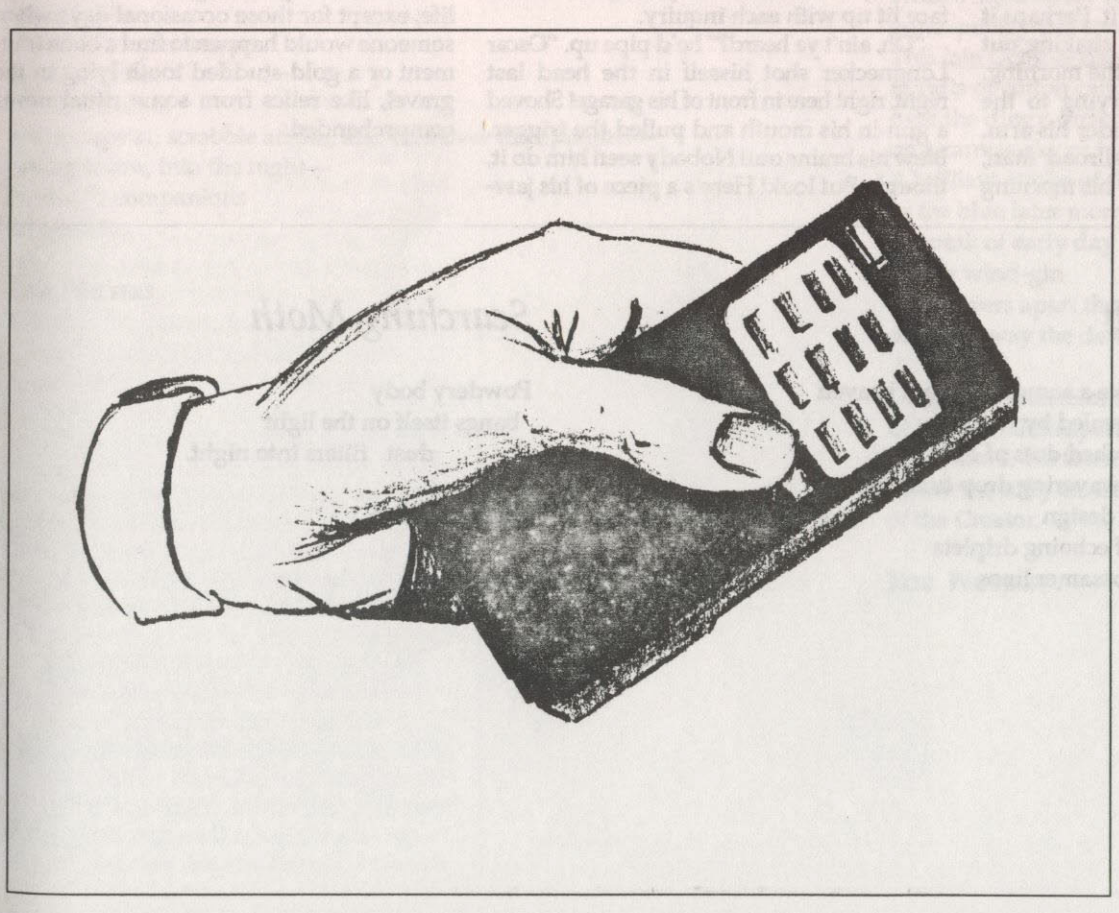
Often, he would slump in his vibrating recliner—like deadweight—after an exhausting day of chores and never-ending farm work. But always by his side sat the devoted remote control.

It was his little black Bible—his guide to life, or at least to television viewing. Maybe it was his prized toy, like a miniature computer game or an antique black car. Whatever it was in his mind, he could not live apart from it. The problem was that he didn't know it.

One day, he clomped into the house with his scuffed brown boots and dirt-stained face. His destination was the living room, and his thoughts were fixed on the control. Traces of roast beef and mashed potatoes lingered in the air—enough to distract him for only a few seconds. It was 6:00. Time for supper, and the evening news.

But the gadget was not in its usual place—the stained mahogany table. In fact, it was not in any of its usual places. He overturned newspapers and magazines on the table, but no control. He searched under chairs and the couch—still no control. He checked on top the television set, but nothing.

Unnerved, he stomped into the kitchen to accuse his wife of moving it. She mumbled something about last seeing it on the microwave several days ago, as she stirred the steaming brown gravy. He followed her clue, but found nothing.



Desperately, he charged upstairs to confront his children. But they had no answers either. Grumbling under his breath, he complained about how his kids had to learn some responsibility. They chuckled at his state of mind.

Combing the same areas he'd searched thoroughly before, he uncovered nothing but dust. Again, he passed the TV, stirring up more dust with his fury. Why he didn't just strike the POWER button on the TV no one knew.

By this time, it was 6:25. Supper was ready and he'd missed the news—all because some irresponsible person had lost HIS remote control.

As he sat down, admitting his defeat and disgust, a corner of black peeked out of his back jean pocket. When he'd locate his little friend, he didn't know. But he'd find the irresponsible person who lost it. That was for sure.

The Eccentric

Ruth Koob

His name was Oscar Longnecker. He was a phantom figure. He left in silence every morning and returned in silence every afternoon, vanishing into his brown stucco house. He never mixed with his neighbors, never joined the evening gatherings on the widow's front porch, never fell in step with the men who shouldered fishing poles, never added his voice to the Sunday afternoon critiques of the Reverend's sermon. Never so much as nodded a greeting to anyone. Because of him, two multi-syllabic words were added to the vocabularies of the neighborhood children, for mothers invariably described him as a bachelor and an eccentric, as if those terms somehow belonged together.

He was a thoroughly undramatic man. Even the peak experience of his life went unnoticed, the climactic event unwitnessed. No one knew who discovered it. Perhaps it was the housewife next door, shaking out her dust mop into the face of the morning. Or maybe her husband, hurrying to the outhouse with a wish book under his arm. Perhaps it was the retired railroad man, sauntering off to the depot for his morning cup of coffee. Or the little pinafored girl, making her usual hop-skip-jump passage through the clover and the bumble bees. Or the newspaper boy, peddling past on his new Schwinn bicycle. Or maybe it was the old Chateau-Thierry veteran, shuffling through the wet grass to inspect his rabbit hutches. Regardless, news of the incident did not, as was customary, travel by word of mouth. The neighborhood only learned of it haphazardly, by passing by.

Slowly, a group formed in the center of Oscar Longnecker's graveled driveway, like the spokes of a wheel converging at the hub. There children carefully sifted through the gravel, like miners panning for gold. Adults spoke in tones too private for eavesdropping.

Latecomers were appraised of the situation by a freckle-faced youngster whose face lit up with each inquiry.

"Oh, ain't ya heard?" he'd pipe up. "Oscar Longnecker shot hisself in the head last night, right here in front of his garage! Shoved a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Blew his brains out! Nobody seen him do it, though. But look! Here's a piece of his jawbone and even some of his teeth! Ain't it somethin'?"

Eventually everyone in the vicinity stood in the sun in the middle of Oscar's driveway, silently wondering how someone could be a part of their neighborhood and yet remain forever apart from it. A few of them approached the brown stucco house and peered into the windows, looking for some clue as to who Oscar had been, but the rooms revealed no secrets. They tried to recollect what he had looked like, but his small comings and goings had only been noticed peripherally.

After a while, the grown-ups wandered on home, shaking their heads. The kids pocketed as many souvenirs as they could find, and the day and the summer went on without Oscar Longnecker.

Soon he was quite forgotten, in death as in life, except for those occasional days when someone would happen to find a bone fragment or a gold-studded tooth lying in the gravel, like relics from some ritual never comprehended.

Spider's Web

Morning miracle, like a snowflake from heaven
Translucent web revealed by
Small delicately perched dots of dew.
And suddenly, one wavering drop tumbles
Shattering a perfect design
Sending cascades of echoing driplets
Re-camouflaging gossamer lines.

Kirsten Zenker

Searching Moth

Powdery body
bangs itself on the light
dust filters into night.

Rachel Searcy

The Night

cracks a fall-dried oak twig,
brushes a wool-shielded shoulder
with capering nudge
of skipping zephyr.
hides the last ante-frost spider-weaves
behind amorphous fingers
and palms— (imperfectly stashed)
held, till the final instant, to ambush
the oblivious passerby
who trips and stumbles
on discarded acorn shards, rain-worn
traprock, the gathered detritus
of August's precipitation
because he only glowers in a lowface.
And laughs with rasping
foxvoices from crevice-dens
at the uninitiate.
Growing impatient,
taunts
the dread daypilgrims
with coded scrawling calls
of great horned owls
who, dish-eyed, trace the wary retreat.
And interrogates, faintly man,
with his bated collage of fading wisps
of their whispered, disembodied conversations
stolen, adopted
from careless
spread gates
of windows proximate.
Light's brother
talks to heretics
who scrape at, scrabble across, and turn over dayepitaphs—
prying below, into the night—
for (lost?) companions
to speak to.

Tom Walters

The Maple Leaf

Once live and green
This three-tiered crown
A puzzle piece of life
Sailed slowly, lightly to the ground.

Like a flag waving in the wind
Warning us of what's to come
Fallen from its tree, cut from life
The leaf slowly dried, crackled, went numb.

Cia Larvick

Fifteen Minutes of October

Fifteen minutes for phenomena
gone quickly this fine chill morn.
This late October dawn paints its rolled cloud bolls
in tufts of cotton candy pink
over the dingy, dusky gray
on a canvas-sky of increasingly white blue.
A brilliant stroke of display,
as the blue later morning combs out
the pink of early day
with a wind-gin
that shivers apart the pink threads;
divides away the dew seeds.

Original Technicolor is this fleeting image
of horizontal diaspora perpetually
in celluloid. We fawn
before the tufty cartoon dawn
of the Creator.

Tom Walters

The October Memory

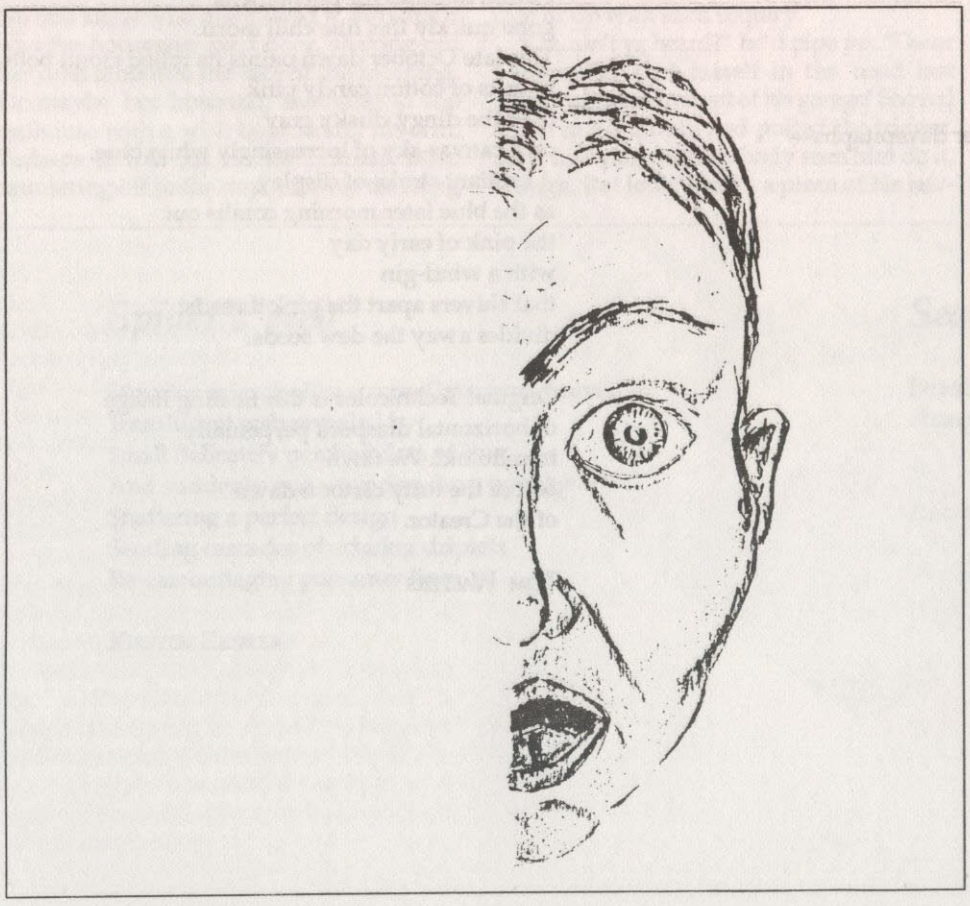
Tom Walters

It had been a warm October day, but the rushing clouds approaching from the west were boiling darkly and beginning to cut into, shred, the failing sunlight. The expression on Doug's stoic face fled as he felt a nagging paranoia germinate—small at first, then noticeably increasing as he drove his farm-battered Ford west toward home. He'd forgotten to do something and was returning from the farmer's market to figure out exactly what. But, for now, he continued to slice into the impending darkness with his truck's high-beams. WKPR snapped and crackled its bittersweet AM country aloud in tune with the glowing blue shivers of lightning that creased the crumbling sky and left red cinders, blurring his vision. Doug pressed his face close to the curve of the cool windshield and glared. And cursed the roiling sky. "Damn these storms, they come without a bit of respect for the farmers!"

He thought the paranoia was a result of nothing more than a daily chore he'd forgotten earlier: closing the windows, watering the house plants—something insignificant. When his wife was still alive she'd always make sure all that was done—she never forgot! But she was three months dead.

As he rolled to a dead stop in front of his farmhouse, he flung the truck door open and, placing his foot down, spat bitterly at the cursed earth that had taken Caroline away from him.

"It was somethin' in the soil got 'er, Doug. Cain't right say what it was. All of her tests came back blank. Hafta wait for the results from the soil testin'."



Doc was only trying to comfort Doug, assuring him that it wasn't his fault, but the only comfort he felt in the days since July 31, that terrible day, was that he was able to convince the town fathers to let him bury her near him, in his back yard. Every day, right before supper, about 7 or so, he went to talk to her—before cooking a lonely supper.

She'd died choking on her own fluids—like pneumonia. It seemed something squeezed the life right out of her—crushed her in two or three days. Oh, the good doctor had tried his best—draining as much fluid as he could, feeding antibiotics into her desolate bloodstream, everything modern medicine could offer. But, she died.

As he walked about the farm he tried to find something to trigger his memory of what he'd forgotten to do. "If only Caroline were here, she'd know!" he thought as he stomped around in a static stupor. After opening the garage door he found a wet trail. At this point the light had receded too much for him to tell, but it looked like spilled oil—dark and shiny. He didn't remember spilling any oil earlier that day, at least not here. The only oil spots he recognized were the ones from that day when, in the middle of changing the tractor's oil, he'd heard his wife coughing, then calling him weakly—the sound carried more by the passing breeze than the strength of her voice. The wind had kicked up suddenly that day, much like today. That day had been the beginning of the end.

He traced the trail out of the garage, not understanding what he was following or why he was following it. He quickly remembered to check for what he had forgotten, maybe this had something to do with it. After all, maybe he could kill two birds with one stone. The haphazard patterns in which the drops lay had no rhyme or reason and drove his curiosity to follow, though the storm and night continued to drain the light from the day. The dim light that snuck through the gray barrier of the sky revealed nothing about these drops. So he knelt down, bent over and touched a spot, wishing only to spend a second or two figuring out what this was. He jerked back and fell over after

rubbing his fingers together—it was sticky and warm. He sat back up on his haunches and laughed at himself, "Doug, old boy, why're you so dang nervous?"

He traced one track over to the barn. There was a light there, so he could figure out what this gunk on his fingers was. And he had to find that chore he'd left undone. As he walked toward the dark outline of the barn, he heard the old planks squeak as the wind whipped higher. With each step, the light seemed to shrink farther away from the barn. And he saw more glistening drops left in ragged lines. They seemed to come from behind the open barn doors that slammed shut and creaked open in front of him.

The grayness of the weathered structure became the face of an angry cyclops: One big eye for the second floor; the pulley brace was a nose; and a cursing mouth took the place of the droning barn doors.

In the distance he heard the squealing drone of the telephone. In frustration at being disturbed, he released, "Why now?!" to the imminent heavens.

A bolt of lightning shocked the scene electric blue and Doug wrenched his head toward the roof as the wind twisted the old iron weathercock in painful, squealing, retribution for opposing its crushing blows. Doug was tensing and ready to stop this foolishness and collect his thoughts, right now! He ran back to his house as the lonely call of the phone got louder and urged him forward. He found other reasons to run: more of the mysterious trails glittered before him in the faint light and infrequent scurryings, rustlings, and flappings greeted his ears from behind the shed and horse stalls. He got to the house and looked at the time as he reached for the phone. It was 6:55, almost time to make supper and talk to Caroline. On the other end of the phone he heard Doc's voice, cracked with fear, "Doug, Doug—are you there? There's a terrible ...." Silence. The phone went dead. "Damn storm, damn trees—somethin' ripped out the damn wire. Dammit!" Doug stomped out the back door to look at the wire but first noticed a rectangular patch of darkness on the ground in front of him. But he was mad and didn't care about that right now, so he tried to follow the limp dragging telephone wire instead. It seemed to have fallen near that patch though. He inched closer to discover the open ground there—this was where his wife had been buried. "Those damn hoods from the town have gone too far now!" he fumed, as red anger rose hotly on his face. Lightning flashed again and exposed a fluttering, flopping mass about 50 feet away. He was cautiously stalking the flurry of motion when he noticed a white feather in front of him. He leaned over to look at it, but the feather blew away toward the shadowed shape that had been the barn during the light. Edging closer to the commotion, he passed where he'd buried his wife and pangs of sorrow and horror welled in his throat as he heard himself chokingly spouting gouts of his brokenness. He approached the flurry of whitish motion while continually gushing foul, black oaths into the fleeing air. "Who did this? I'll teach them a lesson they'll never forget! Those town delinquents are out of control—not for long!" He bent down to grab the hunk that now was far more still and realized even through the solid darkness—it was one of his chickens. Its head had been cut off.

He stood, clenching his fists in rhythm with his pounding pulse, then raged toward the barn, screaming, "I'm gonna get you! I'm gonna get you!"

As he slammed into the barn doors and burst through, he was gripped with fear, but he pushed forward into his fear and the darkness. In one corner, the low burn of a gas lamp revealed, by flutter and flicker, a bent-over figure. It held a butcher's cleaver raised in one hand and a squalling chicken in the other. The chicken was held to the stump of chainsawed oak where he and his wife had slaughtered chickens the old fashioned-way. He snarled at the intruder, "I'm gonna kill you, you monster!" But the figure barely twitched as the knife dropped, severing the chicken's head. Doug cringed as the headless body slammed into his leg with the warm squish of bloody meat and fell over flapping and rolling on the ground as Doug, ashen-faced, kicked it aside in disgust. The figure turned to face Doug in its decaying form, and dirt, and maybe more, fell from the movement. It croaked, "You forgot to kill the chickens before you went to the market didn't you, Honey?"

Doug, reeling as the realization overcame him, slipped on the blood which covered the floor of the slaughterhouse. He faced the wall after he fell and the next lightning strike shone onto his large print calendar pad that was hung there—October 31, Halloween. And pitched sideways across that, scratched in chicken blood by the stylus-like bones of his wife's hand, "Chicken-killin' day!"

Caffeine-Induced Reality

JumpingMonarchs,
Theycatchmyeyesadrift.
mybraindroneson,
catchingthoughtsinflight.
Caffeine—
doubletimeheartbeat—
shakesmy hand
in atrembling.
hot night
into
botchedday!
Afew,24, morehours
anditstarts, stops, again.

Tom Walters

The River's Edge

Nancy Heilman

I suppose being fourteen brought much of it on. I longed to be free from my parents, self-sufficient, and in control.

It was a balmy summer evening. Several church boys were coming over, at my older brother's invitation, to play some outdoor games and enjoy a bonfire down by the James River.

Though I'd grown up living less than two miles from the river, I seldom visited it. For starters, to get there, it was necessary to move west down a steep hill descending into the valley. Mom always insisted that if I'd drive my bike down the hill, I'd never get back up. It was just too threatening. For this reason, my life revolved around places east of our farm, like our country church 13 miles away and Freeman, where I was born.

Another reason the river was off limits was coyotes. Ever since I could remember, the carnivorous creatures would howl to each other at night. Their wailing interrupted the stillness and sent my flesh creeping. It was as if they were possessed, or at least deeply disturbed. Their cries usually echoed from the west—near the river.

It was a dirty river, especially when the water level lowered. Decaying branches, a rusty fence, and distorted containers of farm products protruded from its murkiness, as remnants of past storms and a careless neighbor. But I loved the James because it bordered my father's river bottom land—about 80 acres worth. He always said when we couldn't get a crop on the high land, the river bottom land would produce. And he was usually right.

Sometimes, people would ignore our "No Trespassing" sign nailed onto a wooden fence post bordering our land. They would fish or party no matter what; they were uncontrollable. Dad didn't mind, as long as people picked up after themselves. He hated finding empty beer cans or jagged glass scattered all over his property. It made the place look unkempt—like a city junkyard.

I didn't want to mingle with the church boys—Mark, Kenton, Brian and Todd—that evening. Some of them were obnoxious; some still are. Just by the peacock-like strut he had, Mark was nothing short of a saint—in Mark's opinion, of course. Kenton, though similar to Mark, had a few likeable qualities. At least he could crack a good joke. Plus, if he did strut like a peacock, he had a reason to. He was good-looking. Mark wasn't. His baby-faced double chin and beady eyes got in the way.

Fortunately, I had the company of a good friend—our pastor's daughter. Jodi and I got along great, especially when we used to play school together at her house. I also admired her long brown hair—straight as a line but always shiny.

I could always tell Jodi was a town girl because the minute she spotted a cow or any other farm animal, she would get all panicky. I suppose she figured the creatures were after her. I never could convince her otherwise.

Jodi and I were having our own fun that evening. We'd hide from the boys, spy on them, and laugh at most anything they did. It was refreshing.

As the time for the riverside bonfire drew closer, I began to think of how we could spy on the boys there. My brain wheels turned and got stuck as I remembered the two miles separating the river from our farm. Suddenly, I had the perfect idea! It would be great. I shared my plan with Jodi.

Like a lady, I approached Mom, asking her if I could "please" use our blue green sixty-something Buick. After contorting her face, she replied with finality, "I should say not! What would possess you to do that?" She did have a point—a small one, that is. Though I had practiced driving before with Mom, I'd never driven the car by myself. But I knew I could do it. "A strike out with Mom, so go to Dad," I told myself reassuringly.

Again like a lady, I approached Dad this time. His earth-shattering snores could be heard all over the house like gunshots during prime hunting season as he lay in his soft chair. Dad always had a soft spot in his heart for his only daughter. So I played it for all it was worth. Ohhhing, ahhhing, and uhmmming around in his usual indecisive manner, he finally gave in—reluctantly. I could hear Mom protesting from the kitchen. She always was the safe one. But safe was not always best.

Besides, I finally had the keys.

Descending the hill to the river, I drove while Jodi and I chatted—mostly about how weird the church boys were. I cautiously looked both ways before turning into the steep driveway leading to our field. Slowly we passed Dad's orange "No Trespassing" sign. I turned on the radio as we bumped down the field path alongside the river. After running out of path, I maneuvered the squarish car around, backing—twisting the wheel—backing—and easing forward.

It wasn't long before we spotted my dad's blue Ford pickup approaching on the highway. Screaming, we panicked as we realized it was my brother and the boys. They would see us! Before I knew what my foot was doing, I jerked the car in reverse. Soon, we would be hidden from them behind a cluster of trees. Carrying us backwards, I stepped on the gas—15, 20, 25, 30 miles per hour.

The next thing I knew, we were hanging sideways from the river bank. My side of the car—the left side—was down, closer to the lapping water. Jodi's side stuck up in the air like a jagged rock in the ocean.

A sick feeling settled in my gut as I glanced out the window and saw an angle of the river I didn't care to see. Instead of framing my outside view like a rectangle, the left car window tipped the picture so it appeared a diamond or a triangle. And my body was drawn tightly to the door because of the angle. I felt as if a magnet was drawing me toward the river. The water seemed alive and filled with hatred as the waves lapped the edge like a thirsty coyote. My whole world was distorted. Thoughts rolled through my mind and made my head throb.

"Oh my God! What will Mom and Dad do to me? They'll never forgive me!... The boys—the church boys had to have seen... My brother will scream at me and call me awful names... What if the car slips? We'll lunge into the river and be trapped... My God, I can't even swim!"

The last thought must have prompted me back to reality. I quickly weighed the options and decided that no matter what happened to me, Jodi deserved to go unharmed. Turning off the still blaring radio, I screamed at her to get out. Glancing out her side window, she must have seen a distorted view of our river bottom land and the sky. Slowly, she clutched her door handle, released it, and then slipped out as if walking on dime-thin ice.

My only chance was to try sliding out her still-open door. If I opened my door, I could only fall into the river. Her door was my only escape from the jaws of the river's edge. I hoped and prayed the car wouldn't shift because of my movement. My body pounded as if it was about to shatter in pieces. Inching my way along the seat, I felt as if I were climbing up a great tunnel. Finally, I reached Jodi's door and eased myself out. I was free!

Thoughts of falling into the river and drowning were quickly replaced with thoughts of how my brother, the church boys, and my parents would react. As I figured, my older brother and the boys jumped out of the pickup, ran toward us, and screamed all sorts of comments, insults, and questions. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" cried my brother as he threw his arms in the air. The boys turned to each other and made hushed comments about the car—and about me.

My brother tore off with the pickup to get chains so he could pull out the suspended car. He came back shortly with chains—and Dad. By the look on Dad's face, I was sure he'd use the chains on me. Instead, he walked over to the car and started figuring out how to save it. Over and over, they tried tugging it forward, but the car sat there like a stubborn child. At least it looked like it wouldn't fall into the river.

Giving up, Dad went home to get the largest tractor we owned—a White with duals. Even with this, the car stood hanging, not budging. After several more punches of gas, the White finally pulled the mulish car out. The tire trenches it left behind were deep and black, like the feeling in my gut.

Nothing much happened until Jodi and the boys left that night. I knew they'd have a great story to tell their families, who in turn would tell other families. I'd be a celebrity—but not the kind anyone would want to be. I loathed the thought of going to church in a few days. But for now, I had to face my parents' wrath.

In typical fashion, Mom and Dad shouted, preached, and shook their heads in dismay. "I just don't understand what got into you?" questioned Dad.

Neither do I, I thought to myself.

"Whatever possessed you?" Mom added.

I guess something pretty awful, huh?, I responded mentally.

"You coulda killed Jodi—and yourself!" declared Mom.

You're not telling me anything I don't already know. I figured that one out while I was hanging sideways in the car, I told myself.

"You're not using that car for a good long time," finalized Dad.

Good! I don't want to. In fact, take it away from me—out of my sight. I don't ever want to drive, I decided.

The deep black tire trenches eventually disappeared as grass grew over the dirt. In fact, several years later—during a wet spring—the river purged itself of its murkiness and washed away the trenches. But it also washed away the good soil and Dad's "No Trespassing" sign.

And the coyotes still howl as if possessed.

Seeing the Truth

My friend you speak so little
yet much is conveyed
Not in your words,
tumbling torrents of stories
But in your face, your ways

Oh, your eyes speak true of your heart
They blaze, cajole, caress, demand, despair
Never addressing falsely your passion
thoughts of religion or confession
Poignantly assimilating the things you can not share

I stare into your eyes
Please close them not
No right do I claim to gaze on your bounty
Your disguise remains your words
Your eyes blueprint your soul's plot

Let your words be formed with these eyes within
Giving, loving, letting go, standing alone,
struggling together
Melting walls outside from your insides
She sees these unspeakable eyes
Secret sadness wonders when you will look at her

Sarah Walton

My Wall

Built for
protection,
Brick by brick
To hide
behind
By brick
No cracks
it's care-
fully
alligned
By brick
No spaces
for light
By brick
Over time
perfected
By brick
Until—
I have
a wall
Built so
strong
No one can
come in
and I—
I can't get out.

Wendy Muller

The Sucker For Life

Tom Walters

Uncle Leo had always been a little different. All the people gathered here, in Jakey's Funeral Parlor, awaiting his funeral knew that. Grandpa George, Grandma Ellie, Aunt Kate, his son Butch, and his daughter Bessie—they'd always known. His old elementary schoolteacher, Miss Apple (she's still not married, you know), and his boss, Casper G., also knew. His niece, Penny (that's what he called her), knew and didn't care.

He'd died of something strange, too. Asian strain of pneumonia! Only he would do something like that.

As we all stood there, the men, shifting uncomfortably in their tasteless polyester suits and we women, freezing uncomfortably in our best funeral black (Leo would have to die in such cold weather, too! Probably wanted to have company!), we made enough static to power the heaters that Jakey (that tightwad) had set to "economy." We all glanced, rather sheepishly, towards Mr. Growsely, looking rather the miser in his corner. He was valuatin' everyone with his greedy beadies and even scratching little notes in his (annoyingly) ever-present planner. Butch joked that as the owner of Candy's downtown power plant Growsely was constantly watching for new sources of power to hook cables up to. "Anything for the money," he quipped before the more somber members of the covey stared him into silence. But I was looking away, comforting myself in my cotton kerchief, as I remembered when Mr. Growsely saw Uncle Leo last...

Mr. Growsely was right smack in midshuffle, in the aisle next to where Uncle Leo was evaluating the candy supply in Casper's General Store. The old fart turned to me, down the aisle a bit, with a marvelous look of fascination or consternation on his face. He gruffled toward me, "That you?" with a malevolent rasp that creased his prune skin just awfully. I replied properly (I am a loyal employee of his!), "Excuse me, sir?" He chomped off some more words (so retentive!) at me, "That, that noise!" I listened and heard that telltale habit—it was Uncle Leo sucking on his Charms lollipop (he always said blowpops were tainted). He'd always had something in his mouth. I giggled silently and allowed, "Oh, that noise. That's just **Uncle Leo.**" I stressed those last two words. Leo ambled on around the end of his aisle and slapped me behind my shoulder. Nearly made me drop my winter shawl! He ignored the grumbling from Mr. Growsley's end about noises and public places and Uncle Leo told me straight, with a serious face, to "mind your own business!" But, it was only a trick to tease Mr. Growsely, Uncle Leo had the telling glint of humor creasing his crow's feet. He'd always gotten teased and goaded about sucking on things. Sometimes, it was the way people remembered him.

When Leo had first come to town, Casper remembered him best with a sucker in his mouth. Casper would greet Uncle Leo every morning, about 7, after the first few days, with a Charms that had "Leo" penned in marker on the cellophane wrapper. You know, those pops the kids always liked... kinda squarish on top an' all. One Thursday, Uncle Leo asked why he'd always get a Charms with "Leo" penned on it. Casper said he'd always had a place in his heart for a man with a sweet-tooth, "ownin' a store and all." Well, Leo asked if Casper had a place in his store for a man with a sweet-tooth like himself. And, in a jiffy of light chuckling, a life-long friendship was sealed. They even sealed their contract with two Charms. Then Uncle Leo told Casper that Casper'd have to start remembering that his name was Leo real soon, "workin' at your store and all." That memory was sealed in laughter, as Uncle Leo related it in gasps of giddy breath a few years ago...

A rush of frozen air and the slam of the back doors transported me out of memory. Well, it's about 7 and people are really starting to pour in now. By this time of night, almost everyone in Candy was home and showered, even them that didn't work for Charms. That plant had saved our town and the council voted to change the name in honor (right!) of the company's decision to build here.

The parlor's startin' to warm up as cotton-candy pink cheeks and knit scarves fill the room. There's a poor leftover from the seventies—that tie-dyed scarf of Mr. Coul's. He runs the local Musicland (and some people say that he owns... a head-shop). Oh, oh! There's that poor girl from Raleigh—moved here, then her beau up and left. Times were bad then, Casper couldn't even keep enough money going through the store to stock more than three sizes of hose. He kept ordering those Charms for Uncle Leo, though. And had to keep smuggling those ugly-smelling Cuban cigars of Growsely's in—because Growsely had money.

But her, what's her name—Betty? Patty? Oh, oh yes, now I remember—Lizzy and, hmmm, what was his name, Travis, yes, Travis Jefferson. They found this quiet little nook in the woods south of town. The cottage reminded me of those gingerbread houses Mama used to make when the breeze carried the smell of Grandma Ellie's apple pie into the old cotton fields where we'd play—now the highway that Travis took outta town runs right over all a' those memories...

Lizzy ran after him that summer day, like every good woman should (I would have; he was sorta attractive), but he drove into the dawn anyway. She made it to Casper's General Store, collapsing in her nightclothes, on those squeaky old steps he'd never fixed, as her breath steamed the heavy air. A minute or two passed before Uncle Leo found her, curled up, with her whimpering lips pressed to her knees. She never raised her head as he jauntily bebopped to the store, a fresh cattail sprig bobbing in his mouth. He said he greeted her with a smile and asked what had her at the store so early this morning. She shuddered and squeaked a little sob before Uncle Leo was sure that all was not well. She cried a little more, then Uncle Leo (gentle man that he was) knelt down to pat her back (probably almost killed the poor girl with one of his pats!) and asked if she wanted someone to walk her home. When she sighed out that her Travis was gone and she didn't have a home anymore, Leo asked if she wanted to wait in the store for a minute. She

looked out from beneath her puffy lids and whimpered a tiny cracked "thanks" as she raised her shiner to face Uncle Leo's twinkling brown eyes.

Leo helped Lizzy to her feet and let her lean into his soft plaid flannel as he steadied her on their way up the stairs and into the store. Before Uncle Leo called Aunt Kate, he gave Lizzy a cherry Charms (one of his favorites) and said, "this always cheers me up!" Aunt Kate drove up in that nice Pontiac ... Oldsmobile, somethin' (the seats in there were nice, they didn't make my slip ride up on the way to service on Sunday). Anyhow, while Lizzy never told Uncle Leo about her domestic problems (she said they were too personal), she cawed and whined a little to me, some months later, cried somethin' terrible on my shoulder she did. Though, at least, every time Leo passed by the old cottage (smart girl, at least she held on to that cute thing) after that, she'd come to the door and wave with a little flick of her wrist. If Aunt Kate didn't know why, it should've been a wonder she didn't get jealous, but Aunt Kate she's always been kind to her neighbors; she always understood (she had to, look who she was married to).

Lizzy wasn't smilin' no more like she did when she had been around Leo when he was alive (it ain't plum right!).

As I looked around the rest of that stuffy little corner of a room Jakey called the executive parlor (men have such a way a' bein' right tacky about things) all I could perceive were a bunch a' lips pinched up and sewn into horrid little knots and people buryin' their eyes from everyone's sight. They all were sorta sealed from everyone else. Even Penny, the vivacious little darlin' she usually was, looked across the crowd—kinda glad to not meet anyone's eyes. She was sure she'd cry if she did. She loved old Uncle Leo so much, they'd shared so much over the years...

Her first day of school, Penny was too scared even to get on her bus. She'd played with her grits and didn't even spread any sweet honey or brown sugar over top. Uncle Leo stopped in before goin' to work at the General Store and looked her straight, right in the eyes. He said, "Penny honey, I'll go with you to school today!" She didn't believe him at first until she looked into his warm eyes (warmest I ever seen) and saw he was tellin' the truth. He reached in his pocket, an' found a Charms. "Here, I just picked this up yesterday." He called up Casper and asked if he could take a day off for his family, and Casper G. (the lovin' family man he was) told him it was alright so long as he worked on Saturday. So Uncle Leo drove Grandpa George's shiny new Packard 'round front, (I always said it looked like a taxi, and Grandpa George, he would take an awful fit an' tell me how it was a Packard, not a taxi) and picked the young'un up. As she climbed up on that big ole seat, she looked at Uncle Leo and saw him suckin' on the other Cherry Charms. He mumbled something about how good these were and how he'd hafta make this a regular habit. You see, that was his first Charms ever (though it certainly wasn't his last!). He walked into kindergarten that day with Penny holdin' tight to his hand and sat the whole rest of the day with her, suckin' almost a full hour on that precious Charms of his. The teacher chided him 'bout bein' a bad example an' all, but after a few minutes the kids would start giggling 'cause they heard this noise they knew had to be Uncle Leo, lickin' on the everlastin' Charmspop. It seemed eternal for that teacher that day, but she couldn't pry Uncle Leo away from Penny no-how. That was one of the funniest stories I ever heard him tell (even though I know he missed a few things).

So Penny can't stand no more and runs up to the casket (like one those fool football players) and grabs a hold of dead old Uncle Leo and starts a'cryin. She interrupted everything that nobody was doin' and upset the whole thing. People were all kinda watchin her, sly, but blushing like a bunch of little Southern belles after listening to some luscious beau swear right in front of them. Penny grabbed the flower outta her corsage—ripped it out (most unladylike, I admit) and opened Uncle Leo's lips a little. She took that flower and put it in his mouth I tell you. That moment, even Mr. Growsely looked up and nodded. They all remembered, they all started to remember.

After that I felt so relieved. I missed Uncle Leo too much to see everyone just a'standin' there. I had to do somethin'. Aunt Kate ran up an' grabbed me with a fearsome hug (now I knew why Uncle Leo had to have pats like he did) and said, "Thank you, thank you! Your Uncle wanted it this way, Penny, but you're the only one who remembered."

You see, I'm Penny, and Uncle Leo had written me a little note on a scrap of cellophane Charms wrapper (of all the things that Casper got him started on... well, I love him). So he wrote me,

Dear Penny,

Don't forget me! I'm a happy with my life. And this world, it don't need me no more. Remember me.

Love and Charms,
Uncle Leo

P.S. If Growsely comes, give'em a Charms for me, OK?

He wrote me 'cause I couldn't bear to see him while he was a passin' on. He wrote it 'bout an hour before he died (and I still can't believe he wrote it on Charms paper, he was always a sucker, wasn't he!) I wish he weren't gone so I could see his eyes twinkle when he heard me say that. But the sun's settin' and I gotta drive the family back. Little Leo's warmin up the car, and I hear Bessie chidin' him about stickin' things in his mouth already. So maybe we'll talk again, when I can see the cotton bolls, like clouds chained down before Master Charms, eh?

Two Haiku

The Walk

Little Daffodil
I see in you life's meaning
—circle on circle.

Japan

Under cherry trees,
pink rain falls equally on
butterfly and rock.

BRENDA RENES

1991 Spectrum Staff

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Awards

Ruth Koob and Hannah Gravatt were awarded the Jackson Hospers Memorial Prize, Ruth primarily for prose and Hannah primarily for poetry. The awards were based on the ratings by the selection committee of the three highest-rated selections by each writer.

In addition, this issue of the Spectrum contains two prize selections awarded by the Conference on Christianity and Literature. Rachel Searcy was awarded first place in non-fiction for "Words Between Words," and Laura Verdoorn was awarded second place for "Where Does It End?"